

Harry Potter and the Sword of the Hero Pt1

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http://groups.yahoo.com/group/hero_trilogy/files/Soul%20of%20the%20Hero/

31 Chapters - Complete - Part 1 of 3 - 312,150 Words

Summary: Action, Romance: Rating: R: A thousand-year-old oath stands to be fulfilled. The war between Good and Evil has been raging on for a millennium. It has a chance to end, but has the hero of the side of good lost the will to live?`Harry Potter returns to the Dursleys care for the summer, but he finds the loss of Sirius hard to bear. He blames himself for his death. Voldemort doesn't let him rest though, and soon Harry is flung back into his world. The war escalates, and more people die or join Voldemort. The fear of the Dark Lord reaches beyond the wizarding world and into the Muggle one. Both worlds will collide, as Harry will have to make the ultimate choice between what is right and what is easy. For in this war, some things are more important than life or death?

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Prologue

One fact, universally acknowledged, is that everything has an opposite. Opposites control everything, they can be found everywhere, and they cannot be changed. Nothing, absolutely nothing, exists without an opposite.

Every beginning has an end. Every life has a death. Up and down, religion and science, pleasure and pain, right and wrong. And, of course,

the age old opposite... Good versus Evil.

For as long as there has been a good force in this world, there has been an opposite, evil force to keep things in balance. Evil has always existed. Throughout human history it has appeared many times, in many new forms. Beginning supposedly, with Heaven and Hell, again an opposite. From there things got interesting.

The human race has always needed to fight a war. Whether it was with swords and bows, such as the Crusades. Or guns and bombs, such as a World War. Whoever fought in these wars, one side or another was considered to be good and the other was perceived as evil.

In the Crusades the side of good was represented by Christians, and their belief in the 'one true God'. Evil was represented by the Turks. You read this and you have to ask yourself a question: Did the Turks think themselves as evil? Who knows? Maybe they thought they were fighting justly, or that the Christians had wronged them and war was necessary. Depending on which way you look at it, evil could be either side.

World War II was another horrific period in human history and another story. Evil can be classified easily in this war. Its name was Hitler. A man who used the power of a nation to achieve his own personal aims. One of these aims being the eradication of an entire race of people. Under his rule, six million innocent Jewish people lost their lives. Unbelievable atrocities were committed during this period of human history. Though, as every evil must have an opposite, good was represented by the Allied nations. Good eventually prevailed in this war and Evil was gone, but at the cost of tens of millions of lives.

Hidden behind the wars of Muggles are the wars of wizards. Instead of swords they have wands and instead of guns they have magic. But just because this world is different, does not mean that it is exempt from the law of opposites. Good fights evil, even in this world. They have their wars, they have their losses and they have their heroes.

One such war has been fought for over a millennium. From the founding of a school and on until present day. This is not an ordinary fight, and it all began with two of the founders of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. And this is where the story begins....

Stonehenge, July 31st 998 A.D.

The ground was soaked red with the blood of the dead. A cool breeze blew through the stones as the crescent moon swam overhead. Nothing broke the immense silence that hung over the entire land. It was here; on opposite sides of the circle that two enemies prepared for the final showdown. Only one would be leaving Stonehenge alive.

"Twas foolish of you to come, Gryffindor. Thou has led many to their death."

"My brothers have died honourably fighting your servants, Slytherin. Though it is a pity I will be the only one returning." Gryffindor looked sadly at his fallen friends... so many dead.

Anger rippled across the face of Salazar Slytherin. "You know not of what you speak. My power far exceeds your own. I have created a curse that causes more pain than any other. It will be your end."

Gryffindor remained calm as Slytherin threatened him. "I fear no death."

Slytherin now smiled. "Very well, Godric. Then let us duel."

Godric Gryffindor and Salazar Slytherin raised their wands and bowed to each other. Once old friends, now mortal enemies. Godric tried to forget the times spent as friends and tried to think of the death that the man in front of him had caused. The torture of muggles and muggle-borns. All because of his prejudice over the purity of blood. This had to end now, and he was the only one brave enough to do it.

Slytherin was quick to get on the offensive. As soon as the bow was over he attacked. "AVADA KEDAVRA!"

Gryffindor jumped to the side and landed hard on his back, the curse hit the ancient stone behind him. Nothing happened to the stone, which was strange because that curse should have destroyed it. Gryffindor didn't have time to think about this though. Rising to his feet he counterattacked. "Reducto." The ground around Slytherin exploded and sent him flying backwards. He landed on soft grass.

"You will have to do better than that, old friend."

"Our friendship ended a long time ago, Salazar. The part of you I once called friend is dead."

The two of them circled each other. Gryffindor walked left, his eyes never leaving Slytherin, who walked right. "I'm afraid it has come to this, Gryffindor," he said taking careful aim with his wand. "CRUCIO!"

Gryffindor, not knowing this curse, didn't react at first. This moment of hesitation almost cost him everything. It was the curse Slytherin had created. The curse hit him square in the chest and he collapsed to the ground in an instant, the pain unbearable. His screams pierced the otherwise quite countryside. They filled every hole, every hillside, and every field for miles around. "AARRGGHH!"

Slytherin kept his wand trained on Gryffindor and did not break the connection. He walked towards the man wreathing in pain on the stone floor. "I warned thee, Godric," he said, picking up Gryffindor's wand, never breaking the connection of the Cruciatus curse. "Now madness is your reward." Slytherin pointed Gryffindor's own wand at him. "CRUCIO!"

The pain increased ten fold. Gryffindor no longer felt alive. His very soul was burning. No one had ever felt this much pain. Every second felt like an eternity. In fact he wasn't even sure how much time had passed. It was becoming too much, the pain was taking him. He could feel his mind closing itself off. *It would not be long now*, he thought. And then suddenly, as quickly as it had come, the pain stopped.

Gryffindor looked up from the ground where he lay, wondering what could have stopped Slytherin. He saw it instantly. Slytherin had been knocked back against the centre altar in the middle of the stone circle. Gryffindor was momentarily confused, but then he saw something that made his heart rise. Across the glade, lying on the floor with one arm raised was his best friend, William. Despite a massive wound that was bleeding freely down through his flame red hair and onto his face, he had cursed Slytherin and stopped the pain. But his happiness was short lived. Slytherin was on his feet again. Godric was still too weak from the curse to stop him. Slytherin raised his wand and pointed it at William. "AVADA KEDAVRA!"

Gryffindor watched helplessly as the speeding green light enveloped his friend. When it had cleared William wasn't moving, the curse had done its job. Gryffindor felt anger beyond belief. He stood up now, all pain forgotten. Slytherin had turned and was once again smiling, both wands pointed at Godric. "Your friend has just delayed the pain, Godric."

Slytherin tried to laugh, but it fell dead on his lips when he saw the look on Gryffindor's face. For a moment it had scared him. A look of pure anger and hate. It was extremely powerful. When Gryffindor spoke his voice was even, cold. "I am going to kill you."

Slytherin did laugh this time. "Not in this life, Godric. Goodbye. AVADA-"

Gryffindor was faster. Without a wand he raised both his hands and shouted. "EXPELLIARMUS!" Red jets issued from his two hands and covered the distance between the two men in an instant. His own wand came flying through the air and he caught it swiftly in his right hand. Slytherin however, had been thrown roughly back against the altar. Gryffindor gave him a moment to get up. "This ends now, Salazar. Enough have died."

Then Godric raised his wand, as did Slytherin. And in unison they shouted, "AVADA KEDAVRA!"

Two jets of green light shot out of the end of the two wands. The rockets towards each other and met in midair. Suddenly Gryffindor felt his wand begin to vibrate. His hand seized up around it and it was impossible to let it go. He noticed that the green light of the curses had turned a deep gold that now connected the two wands. He could tell that Slytherin was experiencing the same thing.

Gryffindor felt his feet leave the ground. They rose together, above the ancient stone circle. The bodies of the dead beneath them. It became harder now to hold onto the wand, and amazingly a thousand new golden arcs issued out of the tip of his wand and trapped him and Slytherin in a cage of bright, golden light. And then, a wondrous sound filled the air. It was a sound that Gryffindor always loved to hear. The sound of Phoenix song.

He didn't know why, but when he saw golden beads of light on the thread

connecting the wands he knew that he needed to force them up into Salazar's wand. His wand shook violently and the wood became immensely hot as he tried to do this. He forced all his will into getting the bead into Slytherin's wand. Inch, by slow inch it grew closer. And then it connected. He heard screams of pain issue forth from Slytherin's wand. And then a grey, foggy mist began to fall out of his wand. As it fell it began to take shape. A head, shoulders, torso... and finally legs. It was William.

The 'ghost' of William circled the dome and came to rest by Gryffindor. When he spoke his voice was like an echo, as if he was shouting at him from across a lake. "When I tell you, Godric, break the connection. I will give you the time needed to defeat him." Gryffindor nodded even though he wasn't sure what was happening. "Ready, my friend... NOW!"

Gryffindor wrenched his wand upwards and forced the thread to break. Instantly the golden cage vanished and Slytherin and Godric fell to earth. William hadn't vanished. He was obscuring Slytherin's view. Once back on his feet Gryffindor pointed his wand at Salazar. *Do it now*, he told himself. He could already see the foggy form of William had begun to fade. In a few seconds it would be gone. *Just do it.*

He couldn't do it. Not like this. He watched as William disappeared and Slytherin rose to his feet, wand at the ready. "A fool not to finish me, Gryffindor."

Gryffindor spoke quietly, sadly. "A fool maybe, but an honourable fool. I would not slay you unfairly."

"That will be your last mistake," spat Slytherin. "AVADA-"

Gryffindor had anticipated this move and was faster. "Expelliarmus," he said softly, but quickly. Salazar's wand flew through the air and into Gryffindor's free hand. Slytherin managed to stay on his feet, but he was now wandless. He looked his enemy in the eye.

"Will you do the honourable thing now, old friend? Or will you cut me down where I stand... defenceless?"

Gryffindor didn't say anything for a moment. And then suddenly he threw

both his wand and Slytherins to the floor. "One last fight, Slytherin." And with that, he raised his left arm and in the blink of an eye, a sword had appeared in his hand. Slytherin knew this blade, it was Gryffindors family sword. Slytherin had one to match. He cast aside his robes and pulled his own blade from its sheath.

"Very well...."

A moment passed in absolute silence. Neither of them even breathed. And then suddenly, at exactly the same moment, both men ran towards each other, swords raised. They met in the middle. Metal clanged against metal as the two of them dealt crashing blows with their swords. Gryffindor swung his sword up and brought it crashing down; Slytherin instantly reacted and raised his sword above his head. Godric's blade hit Salazar's. At the point where they met, red and gold sparks ignited from the blade.

Gryffindor jumped back, as Slytherin swung his sword across his path. An inch closer and Gryffindor would have lost this fight. Quick to recover, Godric bought his sword underneath Slytherins and sliced the back of his leg.

"AARRRGHH!" screamed Slytherin, whose leg gave way beneath him. He was now kneeling on one knee. Gryffindor saw his chance and didn't hesitate. With one quick swing he bought his sword across Slytherins neck. "What now, old friend?"

Slytherin looked Gryffindor directly in the eye. Gryffindor returned his gaze. The two men stared at each other. Godric's sword rested against Salazar's neck. One move from Gryffindor and it was all over. Then after a moment, he spoke. "This has to be done," he whispered.

Slytherin needed to stall for time. Slowly, carefully, he brought his hand over his boot and grasped the handle of a small dagger sheathed inside it. "You do what you have to, Godric," he said. "And I'll do what I have to...." And with that, Slytherin quickly bought the dagger up from his boot and swung it mercilessly upwards across Gryffindors face. The small blade connected and cut a vicious gash from Godric's lower right cheek, and up and across the bridge of his nose.

Gryffindor fell back in pain and surprise. Blood fell down his face and onto his robes. He could taste it, as the blade had cut right through his cheek and scraped his gums within his mouth. He felt angry with himself for once again hesitating when he had the chance to end it. Slytherin had seen his chance and took it.

"It appears the last stroke is mine...." said Slytherin, who was once again on his feet, sword in hand.

Gryffindor looked into the face of his enemy. There was no mercy there. He watched as Salazar raised his sword up above his head, with the tip of the blade pointing down, in line with his heart. Gryffindor thought fast; *what to do?* He realised he still held his own blade in his hand. And then an idea came to him.

Slytherin looked at the bloody mess of Gryffindor with disgust. He would kill him now. Without hesitation, Slytherin brought his sword down with a tremendous force. It was going to stab Godric through the chest, he was almost....

Gryffindor saw the blade fall towards him. He didn't breath until the last possible moment. And then, as the tip was mere inches away from him. He rolled to the side and quickly brought his sword arm up and stabbed Slytherin directly through his heart. He saw the face of his enemy widen in surprise and then fear.

Slytherin, now impaled on Gryffindors sword, let fall his own weapon. He felt the cold steel of the sword run through his body and out of his back. He looked at Gryffindor, to his left, and saw the sadness in his eyes. With what little strength he had left, Slytherin spoke. "Well, my old friend. It came to this."

Gryffindor didn't say anything. Even when Slytherin smiled. "This is not the end, Gryffindor. It may be *my* end, but not this war's end. My descendants will finish what I've started. This world will be purged of the muggle scum yet. The war has only just begun." And then he laughed. For a man so near death, Gryffindor was astonished he could do this.

After a moment of that laughter Slytherin coughed, and in so doing brought up some blood. Gryffindor felt that what Salazar had just said

was probably the truth. It would happen. So before he spoke Gryffindor made a decision. "This war has just begun, Slytherin. And as long as one of your descendants strives to kill all those who are innocent, I promise you that one of mine will be there to stop him." Gryffindor's face became hard, serious. "For however long this war lasts, I take a magical oath now. I swear that those who follow in my blood line will be protectors of the innocent. Sworn to fight your line and those that serve it. Until the ending of the world if needs be."

Slytherin stopped smiling and his became glazed over. With his final breath he spoke one last time. "So be it, old friend." And then Gryffindor watched as his eyes stopped moving and Slytherin stopped his laboured breathing. He was dead. It was over for now, but the war was just beginning.

As Gryffindor walked away he shed a tear for those who were lost, and for those who would be lost in the future. He knew that Evil would return.

The war raged on in many new forms over the centuries. One dark wizard replacing another. Someone from Gryffindor's line always ready to fight the evil. And eventually, after several centuries war, Slytherin's line was believed to have died out. The last fight between the names of Gryffindor and Slytherin was believed to have taken place in 1467.

Believing the oath completed, the descendant of Godric Gryffindor did not teach his son of the oath taken by his ancestor. And over time it was forgotten by men. But not by magic. The oath was not fulfilled, and for five hundred years the magic of the oath slept. Until, in the twentieth century, evil returned. Once again the descendant of Slytherin was striving to destroy the innocent of this world. This new evil was far stronger than any that had gone before it. Hundreds died by the wand of Lord Voldemort, a direct descendant of Salazar Slytherin.

Gryffindor's descendant, Godric Gryffindor's heir, was lost. The oath had been forgotten by all. But a magical oath does not need to be remembered for it to exist. The oath lived on in every descendant of Gryffindor, just in case the evil ever returned. Now, as Voldemort's reign of terror continued, the oath tried to get itself remembered, by anyone.

The magic in the oath gave a prophecy to one Sibyll Trelawney:

*'The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches ..
born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month
dies ... and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have
power the Dark Lord knows not ... and either must die at the hand of
the other for neither can live while the other survives ... the one with
the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month
dies ...'*

This prophecy was heard by the current headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. He set about to unravel it and came up with two names. Harry Potter and Neville Longbottom. Both fit the prophecy.

The Dark Lord heard also of this prophecy, but not it all. He discovered a name to match what he knew. He marked Harry Potter as his equal, and met what many believed to be his downfall at the hands of a baby. On Halloween night, 1981.

The magical oath set down by Gryffindor almost a thousand years ago had once again set Slytherin against Gryffindor. Voldemort was defeated for a time. And for thirteen years peace once again lived in the hearts of many. But Voldemort didn't rest. He was returned to his body, as Harry Potter, now a student of Hogwarts, watched helplessly in 1995.

Harry Potter did not know he had been marked by Voldemort since birth, he did not know of the magical oath taken by Gryffindor, and he did not know of the Prophecy. As he returned once again to Hogwarts for his fifth year. Voldemort lay heavily on his mind. Nothing had been heard of the Dark Lord since his rebirth, and most people didn't believe or didn't want to believe that he had returned.

And finally, at the end of his fifth year, Voldemort was seen alive and the truth was out. Though it had cost Harry the life of someone he held dear.

And now, as the war once again escalates, the oath of Gryffindor is

called upon again. As the final battle between good and evil, Gryffindor and Slytherin, rests on the shoulders of Harry Potter.

Chapter 1 - The Day I Died

War is blazing on the field The sound of a thousand battle cries heard As one by one the brave do fall Death comes to men who had it all Leaving but a few upon the field, to remember the day I died

-- Anonymous

"POTTER, GET DOWN HERE NOW!"

Harry was lying awake in bed, the early morning rays of sunlight shining in on to his face through his window. He was trying to ignore his Uncle Vernon's bellows from down below, trying to block them out because he had just awoken from a very real dream about his late godfather, Sirius. Sirius had died last June at the Ministry of Magic while trying to fight off Death Eaters that had attacked Harry and his friends. Harry held himself responsible for his death and it ate him up inside. All Harry could recall from this dream was that Sirius kept saying the same two words over and over again... *They're coming.*

"YOU HAVE THREE SECONDS TO GET HERE NOW, OR ELSE -"

Harry didn't get to hear what would happen if he wasn't downstairs in three seconds, because at that moment his uncle was drowned out by the screech of what was unmistakably an owl. He looked up from bed over to his window and saw that two owls were seated outside on the sill. After dragging himself out of bed, Harry opened the window and let them fly in. One of the owls was carrying his subscription to the Daily Prophet. It was very well behaved and stood quite still while he removed the paper and placed a few knuts in a small leather pouch attached to the

birds leg. The second owl was anxiously waiting for Harry to remove a letter attached to its leg. He removed this letter and gave both owls a treat before they flew out again through the open window. Having been nervously waiting for bad news all summer, he decided to read the Prophet first. He unfolded the paper, dreading the stories of death and destruction that it might hold. He breathed a sigh of relief when he saw the headline.

CALL FOR MINISTER OF MAGIC'S RESIGNATION

by Felice Garnet

The wizarding community has been in uproar these past few weeks over the failure of Cornelius Fudge, our current Minister of Magic, to act earlier on the claims that He Who Must Not Be Named has returned and is once again gathering power. Fudge knew of these claims for roughly thirteen months before You-Know-Who was seen alive and well at the Ministry of Magic one month ago. To add to Fudge's embarrassment the Dementors of Azkaban abandoned the Ministry and sided with You-Know-Who. The Dementors have not been seen since. Many people no longer feel confident in Fudge's abilities and have called for his resignation. Rose Gudreta, 31, was asked what she thought of Cornelius Fudge.

"Fudge is a pompous idiot who was only looking out for himself and for the office he holds. If he had listened to Harry Potter and Albus Dumbledore, You-Know-Who may not have gotten the Dementors."

Witches and Wizards everywhere feel that it is time for Fudge to step aside and allow for a more qualified person to take his place. This reporter, for one, would like to see that happen. The 'Minister' was unavailable for comment on this issue.

Harry finished reading the article and tossed the paper aside with a small smile. Fudge was getting what he deserved. He made a move to open

his letter when-

"POTTER, NOW!"

Sighing, Harry decided to open the letter later. He put it on his bedside table and grabbed a few owl treats before beginning to make his way out onto the landing. As he had expected, he was stopped at the top of the stairs by Dudley's latest acquisition. Sitting there on the landing was Killer, a dog almost as big as Harry himself. Killer was a German shepherd crossed with a Labrador; he had brown fur that grew in huge amounts all over his shaggy body and a long tail that seemed to be constantly swinging. The dog would not allow anyone to go down or come up the stairs without first giving him a treat. Killer looked mean but Harry knew he was as soft as butter. As he passed, the dog jumped up and tried to get at his face. "Alright, alright..." laughed Harry. He gave Killer one of the owl treats he'd picked up and took his chance to slip down the stairs while the dog was distracted.

When he entered the kitchen he saw that Dudley was sitting at the table eating a huge breakfast, he had about four different types of meat piled on to a thin slice of white bread and had just covered it in brown sauce. Harry had forgotten, but today was the day that Dudley was defending his title as "Junior Heavyweight Inter-School Boxing Champion of the Southeast". He saw that Aunt Petunia was busy with the stove and that Uncle Vernon was reading the paper at the table. No one said anything as he entered. Harry took a seat opposite Dudley and began buttering some toast.

"About time," snarled Uncle Vernon as he put the paper down to glare at his nephew. "What took you so long?"

"Post," replied Harry simply.

"I've told you about those owls, boy."

"Don't worry, they're gone."

Uncle Vernon surveyed Harry for a moment while piling some bacon on to his plate. Harry surveyed Uncle Vernon for a moment while spreading some jam onto his toast.

Finally Harry broke the silence. "What did you want?" he asked, not really caring.

"Dudley's boxing championship is today," Vernon announced with pride. "We're going and leaving you here. I don't want to come back and find the house a mess. You are not to touch any of our possessions or steal food from the fridge. You are not-"

Harry had been given a speech similar to this last year. He just sat there nodding his head as his uncle told him 'the rules'. He wouldn't argue, (no matter how stupid they were) he was better than that.

"Is that clear?"

"Crystal."

"Good," said Uncle Vernon as he turned his attention back to his newspaper.

"Is that it?" asked Harry. He didn't get a reply.

Harry took his toast and headed back to his room, giving Killer a treat as he went. Once back in his room, he sat on the bed and started to eat. As he was eating he picked up the letter from before and examined it. The envelope was made of a fine parchment and his name was written on the front in emerald green ink. It was sealed with the Hogwarts crest. Harry knew what this letter was. He had been expecting it sometime in July, and here it was. He swallowed his toast and nervously broke the wax seal on the envelope and removed the piece of parchment from within. As he had suspected; it was his OWL results. Beginning to read the letter, Harry could feel his heart pounding in his chest. These results decided what he would be able to do career wise once he left school.

HOGWARTS SCHOOL OF WITCHCRAFT AND WIZARDRY

Headmaster: Albus Dumbledore

(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc., Chf. Warlock,

Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)

Dear Mr. Potter,

Please find enclosed with this letter the results of your Ordinary Wizarding Level (OWL) exams, which you sat earlier this year at Hogwarts. I am pleased to inform you that your results were amongst the highest in the year.

Harry knew who would have the highest results in the year- Hermione. Hermione always aced exams and was the smartest witch he knew. More than that she was a really good friend. Harry turned the page and found the list of OWL's that he had achieved.

Ordinary Wizarding Levels

Name: Harry James Potter House: Gryffindor

Subject: Theory Practical

Charms Outstanding Outstanding

Transfiguration Exceeded Expectations Outstanding

Herbology Acceptable Outstanding

DADA Outstanding Outstanding

Potions Exceeded Expectations Exceeded Expectations

Care of Magical Creatures Outstanding Outstanding

Astronomy Acceptable Acceptable

Divination Acceptable Poor

History of Magic Acceptable - - - - -

Overall grade for OWL examinations is - Outstanding

Total OWL's received - 14

Harry read his results again, with more than a little satisfaction, before turning the page over and finding a note attached to the back. It read:

Dear Harry,

First of all, congratulations on your results. They are excellent. I myself

achieved results similar to these back when I was in school. Outstanding is just that, Harry. Well done. Secondly, and this is the main point of my letter. I don't want you to dwell too much on the prophecy. You do not need to worry about this yet.

HA! thought Harry. How could he not dwell on the prophecy? The prophecy that would make him either a murderer or a victim. He had dwelled on little else for the past month. Ever since Sirius... The note went on:

I know this is more than you should have to bear, but I believe that you won't have to face him while you are at school. You have time to prepare for this. Please take care of yourself, Harry.

Yours sincerely,

Albus Dumbledore

P.S. I have arranged for a car to pick you up on the morning of September first at seven a.m. to take you to King's Cross station. I believe it would be best if you stayed in the protection of your relatives until then.

Harry finished reading the note and the postscript and his heart sank. He had hoped that maybe he would have been able to go to the Burrow soon and leave the Dursleys behind for another year. But no, he was stuck in Privet Drive for the next five weeks, the thought made him angry. Soon he would be sixteen and had proven time and time again that he could look after himself. Why couldn't they let him decide these things for himself?

An hour later the Dursleys were leaving, but not before Uncle Vernon reminded Harry of 'the rules'. After they left Harry decided to take a shower. Upon getting out he had a look at himself in the mirror. Halfway through his fifth year, he had started to shave and it was now a daily occurrence. At school he had used his wand to trim his facial hair, but he was not allowed to use magic away from school so he had purchased a muggle razor in town the previous week. After shaving off the fuzz Harry looked at his arms. What he saw was embarrassing and made him blush in spite of himself. They were terribly thin and weak. He examined his

chest and discovered the same problem here. It was pathetic; in one week he would be sixteen and he had no muscles.

After getting dressed, Harry went downstairs and out of the back kitchen door and into the yard. What had promised to be a warm day had taking a turn for the worse. Rain clouds had gathered and the wind howled through the air. Under the pergola he saw Dudley's personal weight training gym. He promised himself then and there, that for the next five weeks he would train everyday and build-up his physique. He wasn't going to waste this summer if he had to spend it here. He decided to start now. After twenty minutes of lifting ten kilos up and down his arms felt like lead. He decided that that was probably enough lifting for today. Once back inside the house, Harry poured himself a glass of cold lemonade and watched one of the Dursleys possessions for the rest of the day.

The Dursleys arrived home at about five o'clock. Harry had retired to his room where he was reading a book on spells. He had just discovered a variation of the Point Me spell, which can be used when travelling long distances. After saying Point Me, the user adds the name of the place he's going and the tip of the wand will point in the right direction. He had just finished reading when he heard the front door open; he decided to go see how Dudley had done. Harry found Dudley in the hall, placing his boxing bag in the space under the stairs.

"How'd it go?" asked Harry.

Dudley stared at him for a moment. "Well I won of course," he said this as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. "Knockout in the third round."

"Well done," Harry said sincerely.

"Cheers, I'm off to the nationals soon."

"Oh!" said Harry. "I'll probably be back at school by then."

"Yeah....." mumbled Dudley as he walked past Harry and into the kitchen, their conversation ending as quickly as it had begun.

Harry and Dudley hadn't been fighting this summer like they usually

would. Or rather, not ignoring each other like they usually would. Harry thought it was probably because of the Dementor attack last summer. When the Dementors had attacked them; Harry had fought them off with his patronus. Dudley, although he didn't see any of this, knew that Harry had saved his life and was being a little nicer to him. At least that's what Harry thought. Once Dudley left, Harry returned to his room and stayed there until dinner was ready. After dinner, he had to clean the plates before going up to bed just before ten. *Today has been different*, he thought, before his eyes grew heavy and sleep took him.

Stonehenge

Lord Voldemort surveyed the ancient stone circle. It had been here for thousands of years and was the centre of all magic in the world. This was where the most powerful of magic was born. Just by standing there he could feel the strength of the stones. They hid secrets to untold power, which he would discover. He had heard that his ancestor, Salazar Slytherin had also sought for the power in the stones, and it had cost him his life. Voldemort wouldn't be so careless, the magic would be his.

He was there tonight because of this magic. With it he could destroy the old magic protecting Harry Potter at Privet Drive. He would be defenceless. The possible ways of killing Potter once his protection was gone were limitless, and he enjoyed thinking of the more painful ones.

The immense quietness of the night was pierced by... CRACK! Three wizards appeared on Voldemort's left. They were dressed in long, dark robes and had masks on their faces. As they approached their master they sank to their knees.

"My Lord," they said in unison.

"Rise," Voldemort ordered lazily. The three wizards rose. "Did you find it?"

The wizard on the far left produced a book from his robes. "Yes my Lord," he said, as he passed the book to Voldemort. "It was hidden in the pyramid at Giza. Where you said it would be. There was... a little

resistance."

"Ah, excellent, excellent," muttered Voldemort. "Yes... this is the correct book." He now looked back at the Death Eater who spoke. "Little resistance you say? I sent four of you..." The Death Eater couldn't meet Voldemort's eyes. "A loss is unacceptable. Our numbers are still too short. Punishment is in order." As he said these final words Voldemort removed his wand from within his jet black robes.

"Master... no..." said the far left Death Eater in fear. Too late.

"Crucio." The Death Eater fell to the hard ground and screamed in pain. His very nerves on fire. Voldemort held the connection for a full minute before releasing the man from his pain. "Let this be a lesson to you all. Failure is not an option. Now rise."

"Ah- Yes, my Lord." The Death Eater picked himself up off the ground and took his place among the three. There was silence for a moment as Voldemort read the book he had just received.

"My Lord," one of the wizards mumbled. "Please could you tell us why this book is so important to the stones?"

Voldemort stared at his Death Eater for a moment before answering. "Very well," he replied. "This book contains certain runes, incantations, and rituals. If they are performed properly the secrets in the stones will be revealed to us. So it is told."

"Oh! Thank you, my Lord," said the Death Eater.

Voldemort nodded and continued skimming through the book. Eventually he looked up. "We begin soon," he ordered, "return here with seventeen others tomorrow evening." And with that he was gone, leaving the Death Eaters to prepare.

Harry's alarm woke him at five the next morning. He had come to the conclusion that it would probably be best if the Dursleys didn't know he was using the gym. After getting changed into shorts and a t-shirt he grabbed an owl treat and moved quietly on to the landing, as he had

suspected Killer was asleep at the top of the stairs. Harry crept slowly towards him. Killer awoke and raised his head expectantly as Harry drew near. He threw him a treat and continued on down the stairs, avoiding the steps he knew would creak, eventually he was outside. It was still dark and Harry couldn't see further than a few metres in any direction. He exercised for an hour, using the weights for thirty minutes, after which he felt like giving up, but he persevered and moved on to the exercise bike for half an hour. Once he had finished he made his way up to the shower, in which he collapsed against the wall of the cubicle and let the water drip down on him from above. After he had washed he went back down stairs and made some breakfast, toast and a cup of tea, all before anyone else in the house was up.

After a few days of this it became easier to lift the weights and ride the bike. It also became easier to stay standing in the shower. It felt good to be doing it as well. Already he could see that his arms had become tougher and that his chest was a little more defined. The bike riding had made his legs stronger as well. He felt like he was doing something useful with himself, training to fight when the time came.

The morning of July thirty-first dawned like any other. Harry was awake at five o'clock and went down to the gym. He had extended his exercise to an hour and a half every morning, now he was more use to the routine. Forty-five minutes of weights and forty-five minutes of bike riding. He paused every fifteen minutes for a rest, and then continued. After his shower he made his way back into his room, just as the sun began to shine over the roofs of the houses across the street and in through his window. It was the small light of dawn, just enough to see by.

Harry sat at the desk and looked at his clock. It was seven a.m. He sat there for a minute thinking about his birthday. *Sixteen* he thought. Not bad considering how hard it was to get here. Not for the first time in his life, he imagined what it would be like to celebrate today with his parents. Or still have Sirius with him on this day. His eyes had begun to water when there was a small *hoot* at his window. Outside on the sill was Hedwig, carrying a parcel. He opened the window and she flew in gracefully, dropping the parcel neatly on the bed and then flying over to her cage.

"Thanks Hedwig," he said. She uttered a small hoot in recognition.

The parcel had his name on the front in an untidy scrawl he recognised as Hagrid's. He removed the card.

Dear Harry,

Happy birthday!

Who would have thought it - sixteen!

Sent you the Magical Creatures texts for next year and of course some of my famous rock cakes.

Stay well,

Hagrid

Harry opened the parcel and found the sack of rock cakes and the book. He had too much experience with Hagrid's cooking to actually eat the cakes, but he kept them because they came in handy as paperweights and doorstops. These he placed in his trunk. The book, thankfully didn't try to bite him, it was red and had a picture of a lion on the front that wasn't quite a lion. It had great wings that spanned the entire cover of the book; the creature seemed familiar to Harry. The book was titled, *Magical Creatures: NEWT Level. Simple and to the point* thought Harry, reading the title.

Harry was just about to read the book when two more owls flew through the open window and into his room. One of the owls he recognised as Hermes- Percy's owl. He wondered if Percy had made up with his family. Last year when Harry and Dumbledore had told everyone that Voldemort had been resurrected, Percy had turned away from his parents because they believed and supported Dumbledore, who at the time, was shunned for even suggesting that Voldemort had returned. The second owl was a Hogwarts bird that quickly delivered its mail and left.

Harry opened the parcel from Hermes first. Inside he found a card from the Weasleys.

Dear Harry,

Happy birthday mate!

Hope you like your present (you'd better, it cost us a pretty knut!). It's a pocket watch that we had custom made. You said you always liked the clock in the kitchen that showed you where each Weasley was. Well this watch shows you where you, Hermione and me are.

Harry opened the small velvet case that contained the watch; what he saw inside made his jaw drop. The casing of the watch was made of platinum and had been engraved with two words- *Forever Friends* -. He opened the casing and saw the clock face. It had three hands; each hand had a small picture on the end; one of Harry, one of Ron, and one of Hermione. The hands had a choice of pointing to four different locations. On the right side of the face was the word: Home. All three hands were pointing to this at the moment. On the bottom of the face was the word: Travelling. On the left side of the face was: Hogwarts. And on the top of the face, (where the 12 usually went) were two words: Mortal Peril. Harry hoped all three hands kept away from that one. The watch was complete with a small hole at the top for a chain. Harry went back to the letter.

It's from all of us here at The Burrow. Dad asked Dumbledore the other day if you could come stay with us, but Dumbledore said you were to stay with the muggles for the summer, so tough luck. Heard you did really well on your OWL's, I got an overall grade of Exceeded Expectations, with 11 OWL's in total, so at least Mum was happy. I'll see you at King's Cross on September first.

Ron

P.S. Percy came home about a week ago and apologised to Mum & Dad. Isn't really much to say except that Mum wouldn't stop crying and hugging him and that Dad kept slapping him on the back. It was a bit difficult for the first few days but now it's like he never left. Though I still think he's a bit of a git. Back to his cauldron reports and everything.

Harry finished reading the letter and put it aside. It was good to know that Percy had made up with his family, in times like these that was really

important. He was about to open the letter from Hogwarts when Ron's owl Pig flew in through the window and started doing frantic circles around the room. Harry couldn't help but laugh at him; he was carrying an envelope that was at least four times his own size. Harry tried half-heartedly to catch the bird but to no avail. It was too damned excited. About five minutes later Pig settled down and Harry removed the envelope. He recognised the handwriting on the front as Hermione's. He opened it and inside was a letter along with a golden chain. He read the letter.

Dear Harry,

Happy sixteenth!

Ron wrote and told me about the watch he got for you, so I ordered this chain out of the Prophet and borrowed Pig to send it. It's twenty-four carat gold and incorporates a number of charms that affect both the chain and the thing it's attached to. If you put it on the pocket watch, both will have unbreakable, non-fading, waterproof and scratch proof charms on them. How'd you do on your OWLS's? I had the highest results in the year. I'm sure you did well. I'll see you at Diagon Alley to buy our new equipment, just send me an owl with the date you're going and I'll see you there, so until then Harry, stay well.

Love Hermione

Harry finished reading the letter and looked at the chain. It did look very nice and would go well with the watch. He attached the chain through the hole in the top of the watch and the whole thing glowed red for a moment, *must be the charms* he thought. Harry slipped the chain over his head and put the watch under his t-shirt. It was warm against his chest and felt like it had always been there. He picked up the Hogwarts letter and opened it.

HOGWARTS SCHOOL OF WITCHCRAFT AND WIZARDRY

Headmaster: Albus Dumbledore

(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. Chf. Warlock,

Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. Of Wizards)

Dear Mr Potter,

Due to the unusual circumstances surrounding your safety, we feel that it is best if you don't go to Diagon Alley to purchase your school supplies this year. Other arrangements will be made. Please note that this is for your own protection. Hope you are well, Harry.

Yours sincerely,

Minerva McGonagall

Deputy Headmistress

He finished reading the letter and threw it aside angrily. It was as if that sealed it, he really was stuck in this house for the next thirty-one days. Why couldn't they just trust him? He collapsed on to the bed with a sigh. *I'll be all right* he thought; soon he would be back at Hogwarts. After about ten minutes of mixed thoughts, he got up and decided to write thank you letters. Sitting at the desk, Harry picked up his quill and pulled a scrap of parchment towards himself. He inked the quill.

Dear Ron,

Thanks for the watch. It's brilliant. Hermione sent me a chain to put it on so I'm gonna wear it round my neck. Congrats on your OWL results as well. I won't see you until September first but look out for me on the station when you arrive. Say thanks to the rest of your family for me.

Harry

He finished writing the letter and attached it to Hermes, who was perched on the desk next to him, drinking out of a glass of water Harry had left there a few days ago. Hermes gave him a small *hoot* before departing through the open window. Next he wrote a letter to Hermione.

Dear Hermione,

Thanks for the chain. It goes well with the watch. Well done on your OWL's (although we always knew you'd do well). Sorry but I can't make it to Diagon Alley. Dumbledore doesn't want me to leave the house. I'll see you on the train on September first.

Hope you are well,

Harry

This letter he attached to Pig, with great difficulty as the little animal was once again excited about the prospect of delivering another letter. Pig flew out the window and into the open sky. Harry watched him go, wishing that he could get on his Firebolt and follow him.

For the next two weeks, Harry stepped-up his exercising. September first seemed an age off and he needed to do something. He awoke at four-thirty and exercised until seven. He did an hour of weights and an hour on the bike. The other half an hour was devoted to the punching bag. He found that after a week of this he could lift heavier weights for longer. At the end of the two weeks, Harry looked at himself in the mirror again. *Wow!* He thought. The muscles on his arms were clearly noticeable and his chest was heavily defined. He wasn't weak and skinny any more.

Stonehenge, The Night of August 14

Stars covered the clear night sky, all was calm, and not a breath of wind blew. Stonehenge wasn't empty though. The Death Eaters had been performing the same ritual using the same incantations for two weeks now, and so far nothing had happened. Voldemort was beginning to feel frustrated at the lack of progress.

"Wormtail," he called. A short and slightly stronger looking Peter Pettigrew nervously moved towards Voldemort.

"Ye- yes, my Lord," stuttered Wormtail.

"Tell me Wormtail, why have you nothing to report?"

"W- Well you see, my Lord. The r- ritual is very complex and-"

"SILENCE" shouted Voldemort as he drew his wand and pointed it at Wormtail. "CRUCIO." The spell hit Wormtail in the chest; he collapsed to the floor and screamed out in pain. After a moment Voldemort stopped

he spell. "That hurt, didn't it Wormtail."

"Ye- yes, my Lord," moaned Pettigrew.

"You don't want me to do it again do you?"

"No, no my Lord."

"Good" said Voldemort. "Now rise Wormtail and take your place; we do the ritual again." Wormtail got up and moved off to his place around the stone circle. "Bellatrix!" called Voldemort. Bellatrix Lestrange moved to Voldemort's side.

"Yes, my Lord."

"Get everyone in position for the ritual. We'll do it one more time."

"Right away, Master."

In ten minutes, all seventeen Death Eater's were in place on the edges of the stone circle. Voldemort moved into the middle of the circle, and stood next to the altar in its very centre.

"You put your best effort into it this time," said Voldemort. "If I see anyone not doing their part correctly, that person will be on the receiving end of a curse a lot worse than Cruciatius. Am I understood?" The assembled Death Eaters all nodded. "Very well. Let us begin."

Voldemort opened the book and placed it on the altar in the middle of the circle. The Death Eater's started to chant in unison. Having been repeating it for weeks now, they knew it by heart. Voldemort read out one of the last few incantations they had yet to try. "Omni as senti amort ha laq thresa." So far nothing happened. The chanting grew louder as Voldemort read out another incantation. This time a low rumbling was heard and the sky grew cloudy. It happened fast, the sky was cloudless only moments ago. The chanting grew even louder as Voldemort read out the third incantation. Thunder was heard and then lightning lit up the sky. Wind howled in and around the circle. The chanting continued as Voldemort read out the fourth and final incantation. A bolt of lightning shot out of the sky and struck one of the stones in the circle, leaving a smokey trail in its wake. *Something had happened at last* thought

Voldemort. He ended the ritual and looked up at the now cloudless sky and then back down at the stone that had been hit. There were markings on the surface that weren't there before; they were glowing red, as if branded by fire. Written on the surface were the words:

obitus os sanguis

Below the words were several runes, of all shapes. They were an extremely ancient type of writing. As Voldemort looked for the translation to these runes in the book; Bellatrix moved to the stone and read the words.

"What does that mean?" she whispered. She was talking to herself but Voldemort answered.

"It is Latin," he said, without looking up from the book. "In English the words say *Death of Blood*."

"Is this it?" she asked. "Is this what we've been searching for?"

Voldemort didn't answer straight away. Instead he continued translating the runes. After a few minutes he spoke. "Bella, I've got it," he said, a smile breaking out across his snake-like face. "This will make Dumbledore's protection over Potter worthless. Prepare a group of my most loyal Death Eaters. We strike at the end of the month."

Number Twelve Grimmauld Place - Seven hours later

Remus Lupin arrived back at the headquarters of The Order of the Phoenix just as the sun was rising. He had been on the graveyard shift watching suspected Death Eaters. He had just spent the better part of fifteen hours following a man who in the end turned out to be a muggle. *Probably not a Death Eater* he thought, as he watched the man doing his laundry at the local laundrette last night.

Remus was in desperate need of a cup of tea and some rest. He made his way to the kitchen where he put the iron kettle on the gas stove. As he sat at the table waiting for it to boil, the fireplace on the far wall burst to life. Remus looked over at the fire, he could see, mixed within the

flames, the head of one Jonas Twiory. Twiory was an employee of the MMB (Magical Monitoring Bureau), the Bureau monitored the level of magic being used anywhere in the United Kingdom. Remus had gone to see Twiory a few weeks ago and asked if he could keep him posted on any abnormal levels of magic. Dumbledore had asked him to do it. Twiory had agreed but so far he had had no reason to contact Remus.

Remus got up and walked over to the fire. "Hello Jonas," he said.

"Ah! Lupin, how are you?"

"Fine, fine," replied Remus. "A little knackered but some sleep will fix that right up. Yourself?"

"Oh- er- I'm alright. It's just that some really, really high level magic was performed last night. To be honest it's a little scary."

Remus forgot his fatigue in an instant. Now he was all business. "What happened?"

"Well, I arrived at the bureau about twenty minutes ago to check on the levels for last night... except there were none. I thought that maybe the equipment had failed or something because the last recorded level was just after eleven o'clock."

"But..." Remus said cautiously.

"Lupin, the last record, just after eleven was off the charts! We don't have a rating for this level of magic. Whatever it was it caused the monitors to overload and stop working. This was some serious magic Lupin. And I don't think it was the good kind."

"Where did this happen Jonas?"

"Stonehenge."

Remus sighed. "Thanks Jonas, call again if anything else happens."

"Will do."

Twiory's head disappeared leaving the fire to slowly die down. Remus thought for a moment before picking up some floo powder and stepping

into the now unlit fireplace. "Ministry of Magic: Level 2," he said, throwing the powder down. He felt the familiar spinning sensation as the world became a blur of green flames. He closed his eyes as the spinning increased, when he heard the deafening roar he prepared to fall out the fire. A few seconds later he stumbled forward into the Ministry itself. After the Ministry had finally accepted the fact that Voldemort was back, Kingsley Shacklebolt had put a fireplace in his office that connected only to Grimmauld Place.

Remus looked around for Kingsley, but he wasn't in the office. He decided to wait in Kingsley's chair. Across the room on the far wall, Remus saw a wanted poster. It had a picture of Sirius on it. Lupin sighed and rubbed his eyes with his hands. *Not now* he thought *not the time*. Five minutes later the door to the office opened and Kingsley Shacklebolt walked in.

"Remus!" he said, spotting Lupin in the chair. "What can I do for you?"

Remus stood up, allowing Kingsley to sit down. "We may have a problem," he said, moving around to the front of the desk.

"Really, what?"

"Last night some really powerful magic was used at Stonehenge."

"How powerful?" asked Kingsley.

"This was the most powerful magic ever recorded by the MMB," answered Remus flatly.

"You think it's *him*?" whispered Kingsley.

"I don't know; but this does sound very Voldemortish."

Kingsley thought for a moment. "Stonehenge you say?" Remus nodded. "I'll put someone on it."

Harry had been awake and exercising for two hours. He had just moved on to the punching bag when the back door opened, he turned and saw Dudley walking towards him with a smug grin on his face.

"Potter," he said. "What are you doing?"

"Exercising," Harry replied.

"Using *my* gym."

"Well I thought that was obvious... What are you doing up so early?"

Dudley ignored him and continued talking. "I knew you were doing something to improve your physique but-"

"What are you doing up so early?" repeated Harry.

"I wanted to see what you were up to," said Dudley. "But I never thought you'd have the balls to touch *my* gym."

"Can I use it for the rest of the summer?" asked Harry, not really holding out much hope.

Dudley looked at him for a moment. "Fight me for it," he finally said.

"What?"

"You heard, fight for it. If you win I'll let you use it till the end of the month."

Harry considered this for a moment. Dudley was a boxing champion; he was practically bulging with muscle. No magic in this fight. It was hand to hand... but he wasn't going to back down from him. "All right ..." he said, looking Dudley directly in the eye.

"Good," said Dudley. "Boxing then, first one to hit the floor loses. No gloves."

Harry nodded and followed Dudley onto the grass. It was a cool morning and the early rays of sunlight just shined over the fence. The grass was still moist with dew and there was a faint fog in the air. Harry shivered in spite of himself. He turned to face Dudley.

"There's usually a handshake before the fight," said Dudley thoughtfully, his hand on his chin. "But since there's no one else here lets just get right down to it."

Dudley was immediately on the offensive, his fist connecting with Harry's lower ribs. He was knocked backwards but didn't fall. The next blow was directed at his face but he blocked this with his arms, leaving his right side exposed. Dudley noticed this and quickly hit him in the kidney. Harry cringed from the pain, but still didn't fall.

"You made a mistake there Potter," said Dudley, "left yourself vulnerable for attack."

Harry decided to take a swing at Dudley. He threw his fist out towards Dudley's face, but he quickly dodged the punch. Harry was now facing away from Dudley. He knew it was coming the moment he turned around. WHAM! Dudley's right fist connected with Harry's jaw. He fell to the ground in pain, spitting out a little blood as he went. The dew soaking his clothes.

"I win," said Dudley, who was laughing as he extended his hand to Harry. Harry looked at him for a moment before taking it. Dudley helped Harry up. "That was the quickest fight I've ever had," he said, still laughing. He looked at Harry for a moment and then spoke to him seriously. "You know Harry; I never got to thank you for last year."

"Thank me?" said Harry, who was a little confused.

"You know, when we were attacked by those Dementy things."

"Dementors," corrected Harry.

"Yeah them. I didn't see them but I know you saved my life. So... I just wanted to say... thanks."

Harry couldn't believe it. Dudley was actually being nice to him. "It's OK Dud," he said.

They looked at each other for a minute before Dudley turned away and walked towards the back door. As Dudley was walking in the door he turned around.

"Harry," he called. "You can use the gym whenever you want."

Harry stood rooted to the spot where he was standing, a painful bruise

swelling up on the side of his face. He thought about what just happened. *Dudley being nice*, he thought. *Well there's a first time for everything.* "Thanks, Dudley."

Dudley nodded and made to turn into the house, but Harry called and stopped him. Dudley turned back. "What? You wanna rematch?"

"No... Dud- What... what did you hear last year when the dementors attacked?"

Harry watched Dudley's face twist in what appeared to be confusion. "Hear? I didn't hear anything. It was just... cold. And, and I can remember or rather I couldn't remember ever being happy, you know? I knew that happiness was an emotion and I knew what it meant. But I couldn't remember ever feeling that way. It was the worst feeling I'd ever had in my life...."

Harry sighed. "Okay, Dud. Thanks." He nodded and turned into the kitchen.

For the next week, Dudley joined Harry in his exercising. They trained together and Dudley gave him some pointers on boxing.

"Keep your left arm up there," he said. "No, no that's too high. Watch your footing."

He was putting Harry through his paces. At first Harry thought Dudley was doing it so he had a chance to hit him, but after a few days Harry's blocking was a lot better and Dudley was having trouble getting a punch in. *He's taught me how to block*, Harry thought, as he dodged a right hook from Dudley.

"Good, I think you've got it. Do you wanna start on offensive moves now?"

"Sure," said Harry.

Harry and Dudley continued to train, but unbeknown to them they were being watched. Hidden behind the rose bushes, on the other side of the yard, stood Bellatrix Lestrange, her wand pointed at Harry. "Two words Potter," she whispered to herself. "Two words are all it would take." She

watched Harry and Dudley for a moment before disappearing.

Little Hangleton, The Riddle House

Voldemort sat in the same red armchair by the fire that he had done two years ago when he was barely alive. He was waiting for Bellatrix to arrive. He had sent her to Potter's residence to see if the magic worked. She was not to kill Potter he had told her, not yet. That would be his personal pleasure.

He was sitting towards the fire when he heard a small pop, followed by the swish of a cloak. "Well?" he said.

"My Lord," said Bellatrix as she moved towards Voldemort.

"What happened?" asked Voldemort.

"The magic has worked, my Lord. I stood within ten metres of Potter and pointed my wand straight at him. I could've kil-"

"No," said Voldemort.

"My Lord, why not?"

"I want to do it myself," he replied. "I want him to know it was me when he dies. I want him to know that I won."

"May I ask how you plan to do it?"

"I have made a new and improved version of the Dark Mark. You shall see soon enough."

August Twenty-seventh

Harry and Dudley had continued to train for the past few days. Harry had gotten the basics of boxing down and was occasionally getting the odd punch in, but Dudley always knocked him down anyway. Harry was glad that they were now using gloves; it was a lot softer than bare knuckles. He and Dudley had become a little closer over the past few weeks and

Harry had started to think of him as a friend. After all these years he and Dudley were finally getting along. Dudley had let Harry use his computer and watch his TV yesterday. He hadn't done anything like this in all the fifteen years he had lived with the Dursleys, so Harry knew it was special. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia had, if it were possible, increased their anger towards Harry. They seemed to know he and Dudley were getting closer and were attempting to stop it. One such attempt took place that evening, just before dinner.

He and Dudley were discussing the finer points of boxing at the table when Uncle Vernon sat down and glared menacingly at Harry. He then spoke to his son in a friendly tone.

"A' right Dudders?" he asked. Dudley looked at his Dad and nodded his head before turning back and continuing his conversation with Harry. "You got anything planned for the last couple of days of the summer?"

"No," Dudley said, again turning back to Harry.

"It's just that I got some tickets for boxing the day after tomorrow and I thought that you, me, and one of your mates could go."

Dudley turned to his Dad and looked directly into his eyes. "Alright then," he said. "I wanna bring Harry."

"Wh- what?" said Vernon, the conversation not going the way he planned. "Dudley you know we nev-"

"Why not?"

"Look Dudley, I don't want you to talk to him anymore. You know what he is."

Harry sat there watching his uncle's temper rise as he talked about him as if he wasn't there. The tension in the room growing. It would burst soon.

"What," said Dudley, his temper rising. "What is he? A *wizard* maybe?"

"DUDLEY," his uncle roared. "YOU NEVER SAY THAT WORD IN THIS HOUSE!"

"FINE," Dudley shouted as he got up and stormed out of the kitchen.

"AND YOU CAN FORGET ABOUT THE BOXING," Vernon bellowed after him.

Harry just sat there in the awkward silence that followed. Purposely ignoring Vernon's glares of disgust that came his way every few seconds. After a few moments Aunt Petunia walked in.

"What was all that shouting?" she asked, staring at Uncle Vernon.

"It's the boy," he said, glaring at Harry. "He's bewitched Dudley or something into liking him."

"WHAT?" shrieked Petunia, looking a little scared.

"Oh, come off it," said Harry, as he started to laugh. "Is it that impossible that Dudley and I have just become friends?"

His aunt and uncle stared at him, at a loss for words. His aunt spoke first. "I think you better go to your room Harry," she said. "And just- just stay there tonight...."

Harry didn't need telling twice, he left the kitchen and went up the stairs. Treat in hand but Killer wasn't at his usual spot on the landing. Harry moved up the hall and stopped outside Dudley's room for a moment before entering. He saw Dudley sitting on the bed next to Killer. "Dudley," he said, "thanks for that down there."

"Don't worry about it Harry, I mean... we are cousins after all."

Harry was a bit taken back by this. "Yeah..." he said, "We are." He began to walk out of the room but then turned back. "Still on for boxing tomorrow morning?" he asked.

"Sure," replied Dudley.

Harry walked back to his room and lay down on the bed thinking. This was the first time in his life that he had really acknowledged Dudley as his cousin, or had Dudley acknowledge him as his cousin. For most of his life Dudley had been someone he just had to put up with, someone to avoid. But now it was if he finally had a family member that liked him. He

thought about this for a while before his eyes started to get heavy and he fell asleep. His dreams again plagued by two words. *They're coming...*

For the next few days Harry and Dudley continued their training as if nothing had happened. Dudley still knocked him down every time they sparred and Harry still got back up and tried again. On the morning of August thirty-first, Harry rose at four thirty and went down to train with Dudley. Though he didn't feel up to it. His stomach was doing flips and he didn't know why. He felt apprehensive about today. Something wasn't right. He put these thoughts aside though, and found Dudley in the kitchen.

"Harry," said Dudley, as he walked in.

"Hey Dud, ready to practice?"

"Actually Harry I was wondering if we could do something else this morning."

"Like what?" wondered Harry.

"Well since today is probably the last day I'm gonna see you for a year I wondered if I could help you pack, you know... and maybe have a look at some of your school things?" he said timidly.

Harry thought for a moment. It was natural for Dudley to be curious about magical things when he lived in the muggle world. But was it allowed? He'd been called up for a disciplinary hearing last year for using magic outside of school. *Well this wasn't really using magic* he thought *Why not?* He decided that since Dudley knew he was a wizard it was probably all right. "OK," he said with a smile. "We can do it now if you like."

Dudley was very eager. "Great," he said, following Harry as they went back up the stairs. Killer receiving his owl treat as they went.

Once they arrived in Harry's room he could see that packing was going to take awhile. Bits and pieces of his magical things lay all over the room. Parchment, quills, books, cloaks. He saw the watch from Ron on his desk and decided to show it to Dudley.

"Dudley, have a look at this."

He walked over and stared at the watch.

"What is it?" he asked.

"It's a pocket-watch," said Harry, "although it doesn't tell time."

"Then what use is it?" said Dudley, clearly uninterested. Harry went on to explain the watch and its properties. Dudley was now impressed. "Some good friends you've got there," he said.

As the packing continued Dudley occasionally asked what one thing or another was. Harry thought Dudley's jaw would hit the floor when he explained what his Firebolt was. Though nothing impressed Dudley as much as the invisibility cloak.

"What's this?" he asked, holding up the cloak.

Harry was throwing away some old parchment when he looked up to see what Dudley had. "You'll like this," he said, a smile creeping its way across his face. "Give it here." Dudley handed Harry the cloak. "Turn around," Harry said. Dudley did. "Alright turn back around." Harry watched Dudley's face as he realised he was gone. It widened in surprise and then confusion.

"Where'd you go?" said Dudley.

"I'm right here mate."

Dudley jumped as Harry put a hand on his shoulder. Laughing at Dudley's reaction he removed the cloak right in front of him and watched Dudley's eyes grow wide.

"This," Harry said as he handed Dudley the cloak, "is an invisibility cloak. It was my Dad's."

"Wow," said Dudley. "Can I try it?"

"Sure." Dudley put on the cloak and walked around the room. "You still here?" asked Harry

"Yep, right here," said Dudley, as he removed the cloak and gave it back

to Harry.

After a few hours the packing was done. All except the watch was in his trunk; he put this around his neck. The rest of the day Harry spent with Dudley. They played on the computer, they watched TV and in the afternoon they got in a last practice session of boxing. Harry succeeded in knocking Dudley down. Something that he would always remember....

Just before dinner Harry went back to his room because Hedwig was screeching. "What is it?" he said as he entered. "Uncle Vernon will have me if you're not careful." Hedwig was sitting at the window wanting to be let out. "Going hunting?" he asked. She nodded her head with a *hoot*. Harry opened the window and she flew out. "If you're not back by tomorrow morning, I'll be on my way to Hogwarts," he shouted after her.

After dinner Harry went back up to his room and lay down on the bed. For whatever reason he was exhausted, but he still couldn't shake the feeling of apprehension and fear that had settled on him today. *Oh well. Back at Hogwarts tomorrow*, he thought. Though for the first time in his life he would miss Dudley. As these thoughts clouded his mind he drifted slowly into sleep.

Harry was standing in the Dursleys kitchen. It was dark, the only light came from... well it seemed to come from him. Just enough to dimly light the immediate area around him. He was thinking about the veil through which Sirius had fallen when he felt a hand on his shoulder. He whirled around, wand at the ready. Standing there was a figure Harry had longed to see....

"SIRIUS," he yelled, throwing his arms around his godfather. "I thought you were dead, but I knew, I knew you'd never go."

Sirius didn't say anything for a moment. He just looked at Harry. Finally he said, "Harry, they're coming. You've got to go. They're coming."

"Whose coming?" said Harry.

"They're coming Harry. You have to leave."

"Who is coming Sirius?"

"Voldemort and the Death Eaters."

Harry stared into his godfather's eyes. "No," he said, "no. The protection, Dumbledore's protection, he can't get me here."

"It's gone Harry, you have to get out, get to Hogwarts."

"But I-"

"No Harry, leave, get to Hogwarts its safe there."

Harry sighed and then looked into the face of the only person that had ever come close to being his parent. "I don't want you to go again," whispered Harry.

"I know," said Sirius, "but they are coming, you have to leave."

Harry felt his eyes water and knew he was about to cry. " Sirius... I- I'm sorry you died. It- it was my fault. If I hadn't-"

"NO," he shouted, "It wasn't your fault, don't ever think that."

"Yes it is, I-"

Sirius put his hands on Harry shoulders. "Harry listen to me. You are not to blame. I don't blame you and no one else should either."

"I miss you Sirius..." said Harry.

"I miss you too, but you've gotta wake up they're coming."

"How is this possible, Sirius? You- You're de-"

"There is no time to explain, Harry. WAKE UP!"

Harry awoke in a cold sweat. He was breathing heavily and his sheets were all twisted around him. *It was a dream*, he thought, *just a dream*. But no sooner had he told himself this, that his scar exploded with pain. He rolled out of the bed and on to the floor, clutching his forehead all the way down. The pain suddenly stopped and he looked at his hands, there was blood on them, his scar had split and was bleeding freely. As quickly as it had stopped, the pain came back again, twice as strong. "AAARRGGHH!" he screamed, rolling around on the floor. The pain

stopped again and he knew, he knew Voldemort was coming, he could feel it. He had seen into the Dark Lord's mind. They were coming. *They're coming.*

Harry got up and ran to his trunk, throwing up the lid as he got there. He took out the four most important items: wand, Firebolt, invisibility cloak, and the Marauder's Map. He ran over to the desk and picked up the pocket watch, putting it around his neck. *Hedwig* he thought. Looking over at her cage he saw that she must still be out hunting. "Aaarrgghh" he screamed, as his scar exploded for the third time, with blood dripping into his eyes he moved towards the window. After mounting his Firebolt he flew out into the cold night. There was not a cloud in the sky and a cruel, cold wind blew. Once he was outside he put the invisibility cloak over him and the broom. He was completely covered, the only way someone would see him was if he flew directly over them and they looked up.

Harry flew away from the house with what little speed he could, he wasn't going that fast because he didn't want the cloak to blow off. He was about ninety metres away when he thought of the Dursleys. *Shit*, he thought. He couldn't leave them, he may not like them but they were his only family, and Dudley was his friend, no, his cousin now. He turned around and started to fly back. As he was flying the pain in his scar subsided. It was now just a dull throb. *Maybe he's changed his mind?* thought Harry hopefully. But he knew he hadn't. Something was nagging at Harry; something about his surroundings had changed. And then it hit him; the wind had died down and it was quiet, too quiet. It was as if everything was holding its breath, waiting for whatever end was coming.

Harry wiped some blood out of his right eye with the back of his hand. He carefully touched his scar and felt that the blood had stemmed enough to stop the flow. He flew slowly; making little noise, no more than the rustle of his clothes, which did sound very loud against the quietness of the night. About halfway back to the Dursleys he heard faint pops pierce the otherwise quite night. Looking down on to the street of Privet Drive he could see that several wizards in long, dark cloaks had just apparated on to the pavement in front of the house. At their lead was a skeleton of a man, with a snake like face and piercing red eyes, at their lead was Lord

Voldemort.

Harry could only watch helplessly from a distance as Voldemort raised his wand and pointed it at the house. No one was about on the streets, it was so quiet. And then, Harry froze as two words shattered the quietness of the night. "MORSMORDRE INCACEPTIUM!" shouted Voldemort. Harry watched as a massive green skull erupted out of the end of Voldemort's wand. It didn't make a sound. The skull grew in size as it streamed its way through the air towards the house. The skull circled the house, leaving a spiral trail from the bottom to the top. Then it paused at the front of the house, the entire structure now glowing faintly green. The skull moved and hit the front wall. It disappeared, apparently doing nothing. *Nothing happened*, thought Harry as everything grew quiet again. He looked back at Voldemort and the Death Eater's. He watched as the Death Eater's disappeared leaving Voldemort alone on Privet Drive. He stood there for a moment and surveyed the house before disappearing with a pop!

Harry started to fly again, towards the house. This was confusing. *What had he done?* He had barely moved before number four Privet Drive, his home for years, exploded in a ball of green flames. The initial shockwave sent Harry backwards off his broom and plummeting through the air to the road below. He landed hard on his right arm and heard a sickening crack. It was broken. He screamed out in pain, but no one heard him over the sound of the house exploding. It was collapsing in on itself. Through the pain Harry heard a sickening high-pitched laugh ring out through the night, it seemed to come from the very explosion.

Harry tried to get his bearings. He had fallen into Magnolia Crescent, his broom and invisibility cloak lying about twenty metres away. He crawled towards them holding his broken arm close to his chest. Throwing the cloak over himself with his good arm he mounted the broom. Flying up over the houses again he saw Privet Drive. What met his eyes was utter chaos. His house and the houses immediately to the left and right of it were completely destroyed. Numbers two, four and six were gone. Several houses after that were alight with green flames. Hanging above the rubble of what used to be number four, was The Dark Mark, from which the evil cackle of laughter still emanated.

"NO!" screamed Harry. "NO YOU BASTARD! THEY WERE MY FAMILY, THE ONLY FAMILY I HAD LEFT. YOU'LL PAY! YOU'LL PAY YOU SON OF A BITCH! I WILL KILL YOU!"

Harry started to cry. Not just odd tears but long hysterical sobs. He didn't know how long he floated there crying, but when he looked down at the street again he could see the emergency services swarming all over it. *I have to get out of here* he thought, *Get to Hogwarts or- or find someone from the Order. The Order... Arabella Figg.* Harry turned his broom around and flew down to the home of Arabella Figg. She wasn't out on the street, which he thought as strange as most residents were outside looking on at the destruction of Privet Drive. He landed silently on the front lawn and walked up the path and knocked on the door, wincing as he brushed his broken arm against the wall. There was no answer. He knocked again. This time the door swung open of its own volition, somewhat ominously. Harry entered cautiously, holding his wand in front of him as he went.

"M- Mrs Figg," he croaked, "it's Harry Potter. I-" Everything was deathly quite. It was unnerving. There was a small light coming from a room up ahead, Harry knew this as the living room. He approached it cautiously and slowly pushed open the old, creaking oak door. Harry stopped and collapsed to the floor as he entered the living room. Sitting in an armchair, by the fire, was Arabella Figg... covered in her own blood. Harry felt sick, chancing another look at the late Mrs. Figg, Harry saw that someone had slit her throat. He couldn't believe it. Voldemort had made sure that even if he did survive the house explosion, no help would come. Harry turned away from the site of the body and looked towards the fire place in hopes of finding some floo powder. There was none. *What now?* He decided that he didn't want to stay in the house, couldn't stay in the house. Back outside he covered himself with the cloak and climbed back onto his broom. He flew up into the night sky. *What can I do now? They've killed everyone...I've gotta get to Hogwarts.*

Harry pulled out his wand and used the new version of the Four Points spell he had learned earlier that summer. "Point Me Hogwarts," he said, laying the wand flat on his palm. The wand spun for a moment before it pointed to his right. Taking one last look at Privet Drive, he turned away

from the destruction and death and headed into the night, wiping away a tear for all those who had died this night... died because of him....

The Next Morning, September 1st - Seven o'clock

Nymphadora Tonks had been given the job of picking up Harry to take him to the station. She was picked because she could drive a muggle vehicle. That morning as she was driving through Little Whinging to Privet Drive she noticed thick black smoke on a couple of streets over. *Must be a fire*, she thought, as her destination drew closer. The smoke was getting thicker as she approached Privet Drive. She couldn't see the street yet but she knew it was around the next corner.

Tonks made to turn the corner but immediately slammed on the brakes. The street was blocked off with all kinds of emergency vehicles and police barricades. Police, fire and ambulance vehicles were everywhere. She got out of the car and ran desperately over to a nearby fireman. "What happened?" she asked, fearing the worst.

"What's it to you?" he grumbled. The man was clearly exhausted and had a short temper.

"I'm supposed to collect someone from this street," she said nervously. This couldn't be anything else....

"What 'ouse number?"

"Four."

The fireman's face grew dark as he looked back down the street. "I'm sorry," he said, "but that house has been completely destroyed."

"WHAT?" she screamed, grabbing the fireman by the shoulders and turning him around. "What happened?"

"Don't know," he replied. "We think the family at number four may have been experimenting with some explosives or fireworks or something."

"Explo- Wha- Why?"

"Cos' when we got here last night there was this big green skull in the sky above all that's left of number four, which ain't much. It's faded and gone now though. I'm sorry...."

Tonks turned from the fireman and ran back to the car. She started to drive back the way she came. Passed trucks and curious pedestrians. When she spotted a back alley she stopped. Tonks got out of the car and ran down the alley. She checked for muggles. There were none. Pop! She disappeared.

Tonks reappeared almost instantly, hundred's of miles away, outside the Hogwarts castle gates. She ran up to the castle as fast as possible, not stopping until she was at the front door. Pulling it open she ran inside and looked for someone who could take her to Dumbledore, but there was no one there. The castle appeared empty.

"HELLO," she shouted. "ANYONE HERE! HELLO, HEL-"

"Nymphadora?" said Dumbledore who at just appeared at the top of the stairs. "What's all this shouting? I thought you were picking up Harry?"

Tonks sighed with relief and then remembered why she was here. "DUMBLEDORE. Harry- Privet Drive- Dark Mark- Destroyed," she stammered as she tried to catch her breath and communicate what she had seen.

"Quiet," said Dumbledore firmly, his face becoming deathly pale. "Now tell me. What has happened?"

"I- I arrived at Privet Drive t- to pick up Harry like you said but- Oh Dumbledore its gone, half the street was reduced to rubble an- and the fireman told me he saw the Dark Mark above Harry's house," she cried.

Dumbledore descended the stairs, leaving Tonks where she was. He moved into a nearby classroom and walked into the fireplace, removing some floo powder from a pouch in his robes as he went. "Little Whinging," he said. His world blurred and his ears were filled with a deafening roar. He braced himself for the exit but managed to land gracefully in the living room at Arabella Figg's house.

Dumbledore immediately sensed that something was wrong. And in an

instant he spotted what it was. He saw the body of Arabella Figg, rigid in her own armchair, dried blood caked over her. Dumbledore was shaken for a moment. He moved over to the body of Mrs. Figg and closed her still eyes with his hand. He sighed and then looked out the window and saw the destruction of number four Privet Drive.

He collapsed into a chair. All strength leaving him. No he thought, Voldemort had won. *He's beaten the old magic... killed Harry... and Arabella.* After a few minutes he rose, and stepping back into the fireplace he said somewhat shakily, "Twel- Twelve Grimmauld Place." The world blurred.

Dumbledore stepped out of the fireplace and into the kitchen of the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix. He saw Remus sitting at the table reading the Prophet, completely oblivious. Lupin looked up and saw him, his werewolf senses detecting something wrong. "Dumbledore," he said warily, "what brings you here, thought you'd be at Hogw-" Lupin looked at Dumbledore again. He thought he looked older and more weary than he had ever seen him. "Ar- are you OK."

"Remus. It's Harry... he's de-" Dumbledore faltered. "He is dead Remus, Voldemort killed him at- at Privet Drive last night."

Lupin stood up and stared at Dumbledore. "No," he said. "Your magic, your protection. It-"

"He beat me Remus. He got past the magic."

Lupin collapsed back into the chair, a feeling of despair welling up inside him. Dumbledore was speaking but he barely heard what he said.

"We have to tell the Order," he said. "But first I must go see the Weasleys. Can I ask you to call the Order here?"

Lupin ignored him. He was thinking about the time that he had helped Harry learn the patronus charm. About James, he had failed James... and Sirius. He'd promised them both to look after Harry if anything.... "REMUS!" Lupin was shaken back to his senses.

"Hmm? Oh yes Dumbledore. Order- I'll... I'll get them here."

Dumbledore stepped into the fireplace a third time. "The Burrow," he said dropping a pinch of floo powder.

When the world came back into focus, he was standing in the Weasleys fireplace. No one was there. "Hello, is anybody home?" he said as he moved out of the fireplace. He walked around the various rooms on the lower floor of the house. There was no one home. He'd missed them. *They must already be on their way to King's Cross* he thought.

Dumbledore sighed with exhaustion that he didn't have ten minutes ago; he would let them know later. Right now he had to get to the Ministry. He disappeared with a small pop.

King's Cross Station - 10:53am

"Ron, Ginny, hurry," said Mrs. Weasley. "The train leaves in five minutes."

"Do you see Harry anywhere?" Ron asked his Mum. The four Weasleys were running down the Muggle platform towards the barrier that led to the Hogwarts Express.

"No dear, but I'm sure he's probably already on the platform."

"Probably," said Mr. Weasley. "Dumbledore had arranged for Tonks to pick him up."

"Oh, why?" asked Ginny.

"Because it's a lot safer that way," replied Mr. Weasley, as they approached the barrier. "Right. You first Ginny."

Ginny casually leaned against the wall, waited for the right moment... before slipping into it. Ron followed suit, and then Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. The platform was almost deserted, apart from a few stragglers who hadn't gotten on the train yet it was empty. No sign of Harry. Ron looked around for him but instead caught sight of Hermione.

"Ron," she called from beside the door of one of the carriages, "over here."

"Hermione," he said walking over. "How you doing?"

"Fine, fine. Where's Harry?"

"He's not here?" asked Ron.

"No... I thought he would be with you, since he's not here."

"He isn't," said Ron, becoming a little worried. "You don't think anything-"

"I'm sure he's fine," said Ginny from behind Ron. "Dumbledore probably just made other plans for him."

"Yeah but what if-"

"On the train now, both of you," ordered Mrs. Weasley who had just caught up. "Oh, hello Hermione."

"Hello, Mrs. Weasley, I don't suppose you know where Harry is?"

"He's not here?" asked Mrs. Weasley in a similar fashion to Ron.

"Dumbledore will have made other plans," said Mr. Weasley, who had just put the luggage on the train. "For Harry's safety and all."

"That's what I said," stated Ginny. The two of them stared a little nervously at each other.

"Now come on, he'll be alright, get on the train," ordered Mrs. Weasley.

"But what if-"

"He'll be fine, Ron," cut in Mr. Weasley. "Now get on."

"Okay...." sighed Ron.

Hermione, Ginny and Ron got on the train, still feeling a little uneasy about where Harry may be. They found a cabin and were soon waving goodbye to Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. "Bye Mum, bye Dad," shouted Ron and Ginny from the window.

"Goodbye you three," called Mrs Weasley. "Try to stay out of trouble this year."

"Can't promise anything," replied Ron, as the train began to pull out of the station.

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley watched the train go until it was out of sight, nothing more than a trail of steam. They turned back towards the barrier and began to walk.

"You think he's alright?" asked Mrs Weasley.

"I don't know," said Mr Weasley. "I'm sure we would have heard if he wasn't."

Mrs. Weasley nodded. The two of them walked in silence the rest of the way. Neither putting into words the worry they felt.

Chapter 2 - It is Never Easy

It may sound absurd, but don't be naive

Even heroes have the right to bleed

I may be disturbed, for once you can see

Even heroes have the right to dream

And it's not easy... to be me

-- Five For Fighting (Superman)

Harry had traveled through the night, checking his wand every half an hour or so to make sure he was still heading in the right direction, towards Hogwarts. As best as he could tell, the castle was still several hours flight away. He had been going slower now it was light, having to avoid muggle towns, even with the invisibility cloak on someone could still look up and see him through the gap in the bottom. It was about eight o'clock in the morning and having flown all night, he was in need of a rest.

Up ahead Harry could see the beginnings of a forest, he decided to rest just on the edge of this forest. He began his descent and was soon on the ground. After entering the woods, he wormed his way through the trees and looked for somewhere to lie down. After about five minutes he came across a small clearing and quickly collapsed on to his back. The events of the last twelve hours were only just catching up to him. He lay there with his broken arm throbbing painfully, thinking about the Dursleys. *It was my fault, he thought, Voldemort killed them because he was after me. If I hadn't been there they'd still be alive. He'll pay; he'll pay for everything, for everyone he's ever killed.* Suddenly Harry's defense walls collapsed. The walls he kept up so well to keep out the pain... the guilt. He cried, he cried hard, so many dead because of him. He was responsible for so much death.

I'm sorry Sirius... Cedric... Dudley... Aunt Petunia... Uncle Vernon... Mum... Dad... It all started with you, I'm responsible for my parent's death... that damn prophecy

The grief was overwhelming. It was set to consume him. He put his head between his arms as he heaved one violent sob after another. His very soul crying out from within.

If I'd never existed then so many would still be alive. I'm sorry... I couldn't protect you... Why me? This always happens to me... why am I always the survivor...? I'm sorry....

Harry thought about all the people lost, and then he thought about all the people that could be lost if he continued with life. And then a dark thought came to him. A thought he'd never had before....

Continue with life? Why not just end it...? What's left to keep me here... nothing. Let Voldemort and all of the death and pain be someone else's problem.

As these thoughts of death and suicide clouded his mind, Harry brought his good arm up to rest on his chest. He felt it hit something metallic beneath his shirt. Harry reached under his shirt and pulled out... the pocket watch on its chain. In one instantaneous moment of realization, Harry knew exactly what was left in this world to keep him here. Ron and Hermione. The inscription on the cover said it all: *Forever Friends*. They

were all that he had left, and he'd be damned if he was going to let Voldemort win that easily. No, he would carry on with life, he would carry on being the survivor, and he would carry on protecting his friends from the evil of this world.

This didn't take away the feeling of absolute guilt though. He continued to cry, until he could cry no more. And finally, the enormous exhaustion that had built up over the night, claimed him. Harry slowly drifted into a restless sleep.

Harry was standing in a room he had never been in before. The walls were made of stone similar to that of Hogwarts and there was a single oak door on the other side of the room. The windows of the room were hung with blood-red curtains and had a crest on them he wasn't familiar with. It appeared to be two green snakes entwined, one devouring the other forming a circle. At the other end of the room there was a podium. The room was full of people in long black cloaks. Harry couldn't see their faces, they were masked. He knew instantly who these people were... Death Eaters. Though for some reason they didn't attack him. Harry began to move towards the podium.

Standing on the podium to begin his speech, he raised his hands for silence. The hands were long, thin, and bony white. Voldemort's hands, he had Voldemort's hands.

"My Death Eater's," Voldemort/Harry began, "I have brought you here to tell you the most greatest of news. Harry Potter is dead."

A murmur of surprise spread through the Death Eater's who hadn't been with Voldemort on Privet Drive.

"Yes," he continued, "the boy who plagued me for so long has died by my hand. Last night myself and a select group of Death Eater's apparated to Potter's home and destroyed it. It is over, he is dead."

The assembled Death Eater's stood in silence for a few moments before beginning to cheer their master.

"Thank you," he continued, "Now how about we go out into London to celebrate. I hear that the muggle torture has been lacking the past

sixteen years an-"

Harry awoke in the clearing to searing pain in his scar. He pressed his palm against it in hopes of numbing the pain, but to no avail. It burned and Harry knew why... *He's angry... he knows...* Harry removed his hand, there was blood on it. His scar had opened again. He stood up, the immense grief forgotten for a moment. *No* he thought, *he knows, he knows I'm alive*. Harry quickly grabbed his broom and mounted it as best he could with his good arm. Kicking off, he knew he had to get to Hogwarts before he was found.

"-the past sixteen years an-" Voldemort stopped abruptly, he had felt him, he had felt Harry deep within his mind. Potter was alive, and he knew it. Several questions flittered through his mind: *how had he escaped Privet Drive? Where was he now? What was-*?

"My Lord?"

Voldemort looked up; Bellatrix was standing there, apparently wondering why the sudden stop in his speech.

"My Lord, what is it?"

"POTTER! HE'S ALIVE," shouted Voldemort, "I FELT HIM IN MY HEAD, HE'S ALIVE."

"Ho- How?" asked Bellatrix.

"I do not know, but we must find him before he gets to Hogwarts."

"Hogwarts?"

"Yes, for a brief moment I saw into his mind. He is traveling up the country on his broom to Hogwarts."

"What should we do?"

Voldemort thought in silence for a moment, before replying, "He is still several hours flight away from the castle, if you and a few others apparate just outside of Hogsmeade, you could await his arrival. Take

your broomsticks and cut him off."

"My Lord, dead or alive?"

"Kill him once and for all. And Bellatrix, do not fail me. Punishment will be severe."

Bellatrix nodded to her master before moving off. On her way to the door she motioned six Death Eater's to follow her. Outside she headed for the rack of brooms on the opposite stone wall.

"Bellatrix, what is happening?" asked a Death Eater.

"Grab a broom and apparate to Hogsmeade, to the old mill just outside of the village. I will fill you in when we get there."

With a small pop she was gone, closely followed by the six Death Eater's.

Dumbledore arrived in the Atrium at the Ministry of Magic. It was packed with witches and wizards all going about their daily business, completely oblivious to the nightmare that had now befallen them with Harry's death. Several of them waved down Dumbledore, but he had neither the time nor the patience to talk with them now. He began to walk over to the lift. He hadn't been here since the battle with Voldemort and looking around he could see that The Fountain of Magical Brethren had been rebuilt and so had several other things that had been destroyed. He reached and entered the lift. It was empty apart from him and several paper memos and it wasn't long before he arrived at the Auror division.

Stepping out of the lift, Dumbledore began walking down the hall and entered the door marked 'Severe Crimes Unit- Auror'. He looked around for Kingsley. This office was just as busy as the Atrium, dozens of people trying to do dozens of things. Dumbledore spotted Kingsley heading into his office. Moving across the floor to the office, Dumbledore knocked three times on the wooden door.

"Yes," came a gruff voice from within.

Dumbledore walked in, and stood opposite Kingsley's desk. "Dumbledore, what brings you here? I thought you'd be at Hogwarts waiting for the studen-"

"Kingsley," Dumbledore cut him off, "It's Harry, Harry Potter. He -er- he- he died last night at an attack on his home at Privet Drive. Voldemort killed him. It- he destroyed the protection and... killed him."

Kingsley sat in shock for a moment before looking up into the old wizard's eyes, hoping that it wasn't true, but all he saw there was despair. "Dum- Dumbledore, do you know what this means? The war- losing Harry will severely weaken our chances of winning."

"More than you know," said Dumbledore, thinking of the prophecy. "I would like you to send a team to Privet Drive, to recover what they can. Harry deserves a proper burial."

"Of course," said Kingsley sadly, "I'll go myself with a few trusty Aurors."

"Thank you, keep this as quite as you can, we don't want the world to know yet."

"Sure... but what are you going to do now though?"

"I will return to Hogwarts and await the students. I shall make the official announcement of Harry's death tonight at the feast."

With a pop, he was gone; leaving Kingsley to attend to Privet Drive.

The Hogwarts Express

"That was utter bollox," announced Ron, as he and Hermione made their way down the carriage to find Ginny, and their compartment. They had just come from the prefects meeting they were obliged to attend at the beginning of the journey.

"What was?" asked Hermione.

"The meeting of course! New Head Boy shouting out orders. Bloody -er-

what's his name -er- David or something...?"

"Was a little bossy, wasn't he. I think Cho will be a good Head Girl though."

"Yeah...." muttered Ron, his mind wandering back to Harry. Something was wrong, he just knew it.

They found Ginny's compartment and walked in. Ginny wasn't alone though; sitting to her left was Luna Lovegood; Luna had grown somewhat over the summer. She was several inches taller and her hair was no longer waist length, she had had it cut so that it was at shoulder length. It suited her well thought Ron as he took a seat opposite her.

"How was the meeting," asked Ginny.

"Long and boring," moaned Ron, not wanting to go into the finer details of the past few hours.

"How was your summer Luna?" asked Hermione.

Luna, who had previously been staring out of the window, turned and faced Hermione. "Fine," she replied somewhat icily before turning back to the window.

"What's wrong with her?" Hermione mouthed to Ginny. Ginny shrugged her shoulders.

As the journey progressed their compartment was visited regularly by familiar faces. Dean Thomas stopped by and sat down next to Ginny. They were still seeing each other and this clearly wasn't lost on Ron, who muttered a very rough 'hello' and 'goodbye' to Dean. Members of the DA popped in occasionally asking if the club was going to continue.

"I don't see why not," said Hermione to one such member. "We'll probably have a proper teacher for DADA this year but we could still do with a little extra defense."

The light outside began to fail as the sun went down and the train approached its destination. Hermione, Ron, Ginny and Luna pulled on their robes over their clothes. Once they were dressed Ron decided to

voice something that had been bothering him all trip.

"Hermione," he said, "you don't think anything's happened to Harry, do you?"

Hermione didn't know what to say. She felt that something was.... "I don't know. I think we would have heard if something had happened, I mean, the Order would know."

"Yeah.... yeah you're right. He's probably up at the castle now waiting for us. I'll bet-"

Ron was cut off by a familiar, unwanted voice at the door; Malfoy was standing there, flanked by his huge friends Crabbe and Goyle. "Alright Weasel's," drawled Malfoy to Ron and Ginny, "You to Mudblood." he said, nodding to Hermione.

"Piss off Malfoy," replied Ron viciously.

"Now, now Weasley. I merely came by to talk to Potter but it appears I've missed him. I do hope he's okay...." Malfoy said this with the air of someone who knew something they didn't.

"He's-" began Hermione.

"I *really* do hope he's Okay," said Malfoy, an evil smirk spreading across his face.

"Get out," said Ron harshly, using every ounce of self restraint he had not to hit the slimy git.

"I'm going Weasley, but do tell Potter I want a word. *If* you see him again."

"OUT!" shouted Ron, he got up and shut the door in Malfoy's face. The train coming to a slow stop as he did this.

Once on the platform Ron looked around for Harry but failed to find him. Hermione who seemed to have been doing the same thing turned around to face Ron.

"I'm sure he's up at the castle," she assured Ron.

They both stared at each other for a moment before turning away. Ron had a feeling in the pit of his stomach, he knew something was wrong. Hermione had the same feeling, but neither wanted to say what they felt.

"Firs'-years this way," called a familiar voice. "Come on now, firs'-years."

"Hey Hagrid," Ron shouted over the crowd. Ron being taller than most in the crowd, bar Hagrid, was able to get noticed by him easily.

"All righ', Ron?"

"Fine, I was just wondering if you'd seen Harry?"

"Harry? Wasn' he on the train?"

"No, we thought maybe he'd been brought to the castle separately, you know for safety."

"Don't know nothin' abou' tha'." said Hagrid who was now looking a little worried. "But you're probably righ', he'll be up at the castle."

"Sure," agreed Ron. "See you later Hagrid."

Ron and Hermione dragged their trunks through the crowd and over to a carriage, pulled by Thestrals. They got into the one that Ginny had saved for them and began the trip up to the castle. Nobody spoke on the way; Hagrid's words had been worrying. If Hagrid had been at the castle today, surely he would have seen or heard something about Harry. The fact that he hadn't only added to the worry.

Once at the castle they disembarked and made their way up the steps. Upon entering the castle they discovered that they were the first there. The entrance hall was empty apart from Professor McGonagall, who was standing in the shadow of a torch near the door to the Great Hall. Hermione and Ron walked over to her.

"Oh, Mr. Weasley, Miss Granger," she said a bit shakily upon seeing them.

On closer inspection Hermione thought that she had been crying. Her eyes were red and bloodshot, she looked tired. "What is it Professor?" she asked.

"It's- it's."

"Where's Harry?" asked Ron, who was thoroughly worried now.

"He has- Oh I think it's best if you go into the Great Hall and await the headmaster's speech."

Other students had started to arrive now and the entrance hall was getting rather crowded. Hermione and Ron moved through the doors of the Great Hall and along the Gryffindor table. Sitting down Ron had a look around the hall. It wasn't as nicely decked out as previous years. The light came from the hundreds of floating candles and looking up, Ron saw that the sky was clear and cloudless; A thousand and one stars dotted the entire roof. Bringing his gaze back to the Hall, he saw that the staff table didn't have nearly enough staff. Missing were Dumbledore, Hagrid and McGonagall of course and whoever was taking the DADA job. There was also a table at the front of the Hall, where the Sorting Hat would usually go, that normally wasn't there. Hermione had also noticed this and she and Ron exchanged confused, worried looks.

"Wonder where Dumbledore is?" said Ron. Trying to sound carefree.

"I don't like this at all," Hermione said more to herself than to Ron, not worrying about being casual, she was scared. "Where's Harry? Where's Dumbledore? Something's happened, I just know it."

Ron sighed. "I think so to."

The Hall had been filling up around them and it was almost full. Hermione was watching the door for Harry but someone else always came through. She turned round to Ron who had just tapped her shoulder.

"What?"

"Dumbledore's here."

It was true. Dumbledore had just entered the hall. He came in through the side chamber and made his way up to the staff table. Hermione thought he looked practically ancient. It was as if he had aged thirty years or so over the summer holidays. She knew he was old, but this...

He moved along the staff table and took his place at the centre. For a brief moment his eye's met with Hermione's; all she saw there was despair, loss. The familiar twinkle seemed to have died, only to be replaced by a cold stare. It was as if her worst fears had been confirmed; the look on Dumbledore's face told her something had gone terribly wrong.

The first year's entered the hall, led by Professor McGonagall. She brought them down through the Gryffindor and Ravenclaw tables. The reason for the table up the front also became apparent. Professor McGonagall instructed the first years to sit at this table, before taking her place at the staff table next to Hagrid, who had just arrived through the side chamber door.

"What's going on?" asked Ron.

"I don't know," said Hermione, tears in her eyes.

"What's wrong?"

"Something's happened to him, Ron," she said, a tear now rolling down her cheek. "I think... I think he may be... hurt or- or worse... dead," she practically whispered this last word.

Ron didn't know what to say. He looked back up at the staff table as Dumbledore rose from his seat. Every eye in the room was now focused on the headmaster. No one spoke; it was as if everyone knew something was wrong. Dumbledore surveyed the students in the hall for a moment before beginning his speech.

"My dear students," he began, though somewhat wearily, "I welcome you back to Hogwart's for another year."

Hermione watched him from her seat. She heard the uneasiness in his voice; saw the look on his face. She didn't want to hear the rest of his speech.

"I apologize to the new students... but the Sorting will not take place this evening. There has been... a -er-" Dumbledore stopped speaking and let out a heavy sigh before continuing. "I wish that the year didn't have to start on most grievous news but I.... I.... regret to inform you that our

number is one less than what it should be." The strain in his voice was apparent to all.

The Hall greeted this news with utter silence. Nothing could be heard for a moment until there was a cry from the Gryffindor table. Every head in the hall turned to face Hermione who was now sobbing violently into her arms. Ron who was sitting next to her stared numbly at the table in front of him.

"Harry Potter," continued Dumbledore "was attacked last night at his summer home. I'm afraid he did not survive. He was killed, killed by Lord Voldemort."

A collective gasp and shudder spread throughout the Hall and several cries were heard. Ron looked up briefly and caught sight of Malfoy. He didn't appear shocked by this news, nor saddened by it. If Ron had ever wanted to hurt him, kill him, it was then.

"We have lost a great student and man this day," said Dumbledore, "A man that has bared the burdens of a lifetime in his short sixteen years. But Harry Potter's death will not be in vain. We must all stick together through these times if we are to have any hope of overcoming the impending darkness."

The hall was once again quite, apart from Hermione's continued cries. Tears could also be seen rolling down several faces in the room. McGonagall was dabbing at her eyes with a tissue and Hagrid was looking at Dumbledore in disbelief.

"I once again remind you about choosing between what is right and what is easy. If a choice presents itself to you in the future I want you to remember, remember Harry Potter and the choices he made. He chose to fight for what he believed in, he chose-

One Hour Earlier

Harry had been flying all day, after his dream in the forest he had abandoned the use of the invisibility cloak, he had tucked it under his shirt with the Marauder's Map deciding that speed was what was needed.

The wind was beginning to pick up as the sun went down and it had become quite cold. It was a clear night and the stars shone brightly around him. He knew he was close to Hogwart's though, he could just make out the outline of the Forbidden Forest and it gave him hope.

After forty more minutes of flying Harry could see lights down below that must belong to the village of Hogsmeade. He was about twenty minute's flight from the castle and could see the turrets of it in the distance. *Almost there*, he thought, *almost there*. His limbs ached from a full day of flying. His broken arm was just a dull throb now; he'd grown used to the pain.

Flying on he pulled out the watch from around his neck and opened it. The small hands belonging to Ron and Hermione were settled on 'Hogwarts'. *Good*, he thought, *there safe*.

He looked at his own hand on the watch and for a brief moment it rested on 'Traveling.' *That would be right*, thought Harry. He was about to clasp it shut when slowly he saw his hand moving up to the top of the watch and resting on 'Mortal Peril'.

"What?" Harry said aloud to himself.

Harry wasn't left wondering long why the hand had changed though. Over his right shoulder he clearly heard two words that cut right through him and the quietness of the night.

"AVADA KEDAVRA."

Harry reacted almost instantly. Using his natural born Quidditch skills he quickly dived several feet and felt the curse go over him. Looking back he saw several shapes in the sky behind him. He counted seven shapes in all and they all had their wands pointed at him.

"AVADA KEDAVRA."

The killing curse flew at him through the night again. Dodging this one he turned to face his aggressors, pulling his wand out as he went. The Death Eater's were coming in fast; they were about thirty metres away and closing. The closest one Harry recognized as Bellatrix Lestrange.

"BELLATRIX," he cried. Anger beyond belief welling up inside of him. She had cast the curse which sent Sirius back through the veil. "STUPEFY."

She dodged Harry's spell easily but had lost her shot at him because of it. The other Death Eater's were in firing range of Harry now.

"REDUCTO," yelled one.

"Protego," cried Harry, the shield charm protecting him from the blasting curse and sending it back at its owner.

The Reductor curse flew back at the Death Eater who wasn't quick enough to dodge it. When it hit it wasn't pretty. The blasting curse, designed to blast solid objects out of the way, ripped apart the Death Eater into hundred's of pieces. The other Death Eater's were momentarily shocked by the sudden explosion of one of there number. Harry used this time to swing round and take flight again. But he was still a good fifteen minutes from the Hogwart's grounds.

He pushed his Firebolt harder and faster than he had ever before. The ground below him became a blur and the sound of the wind in his ears was deafening. The Death Eater's were catching back up to him again as he felt the heat of a spell fly over his head. *What are they riding?* he thought. These brooms were faster than his. He was giving is all to outrun them but they caught up with ease. There was soon a Death Eater on either side of him.

"GIVE UP POTTER," shouted the one to his left. "YOU'RE AS GOOD AS DEAD."

Harry barely had time to acknowledge what he said before the other Death Eater pointed his wand at him and shouted a curse.

"AVADA KEDAVRA."

For the third time that night Harry heard the most unforgivable of curses. Without thinking what he was doing; he pushed his broom downwards sharply, causing him to fall several feet. The killing curse missed him by an inch, hitting the Death Eater that was on his left instead. This man fell from his broom down through the night sky... dead.

Harry looked up at the Death Eater who fired to curse. He was watching his dead companion fall. Harry quickly withdrew his wand again and shouted:

"STUPEFY."

The man turned to Harry and took the curse directly in his face. He fell from his broom like the former Death Eater and down to the ground. He wouldn't have survived the impact. *Three down*, thought Harry, *Four to go*.

He sped off again with all the speed he could muster. Looking back he could see the four remaining enemies catching up to him with ease, Bellatrix at their lead.

"DIE POTTER!"

Harry swerved as Bellatrix sent a curse at him. Pointing his wand over his shoulder he shouted the first curse that came to mind.

"Petrificus Totalus."

From the muffled yell that came before Bellatrix's scream of anger, he assumed that his spell had hit one of his attackers. Yes, a quick glance over his shoulder told him there were now three Death Eater's behind him and one dark blur falling down through the night sky.

The castle of Hogwart's was getting closer, it was about five minutes to the boundaries; *The Death Eater's wouldn't cross the boundaries*, he thought. If he could make it that far he was safe. With the pain in his broken arm worsening, he glanced back again, just in time to see Bellatrix raise her wand.

Harry didn't catch the name of the curse, nor did he see the speed of it. Her curse came at Harry faster than he could dodge. The dark blue beam hit him painfully in his right leg, tearing away the muscle and opening the flesh deeply and finally breaking the bone.

"SHI- AGH- AAAGGHH," screamed Harry, as his now broken leg bled profusely.

He lost control of his broom and began plummeting towards the ground. From what he could see of his leg he saw that the flesh was torn open, what struck him the most though was that he could see the bone. Biting back the pain and the tears he pulled himself as steady as he could in his condition and continued to fly. He was about one hundred metres above the ground and the Death Eater's were directly above him.

Breathing heavily, and wincing painfully, Harry took careful aim with his wand at the nearest one; he shot an Impediment curse up into the fray. The curse hit the Death Eater in the face and he slowed to a stop and was soon left behind. *Two left*, he thought, as Bellatrix once again shot a killing curse at him. The other man also shot a killing curse but Harry dodged them easily.

The grounds were drawing ever closer, he was almost over the boundary when the man put on a burst of speed and overtook him. Once far enough ahead he turned around to face Harry. They were flying towards each other at fantastic speeds. Harry raised his wand and sent a Stunning spell his way. The Death Eater dodged it easily and took aim with his own wand. The gap between them was closing fast when he shouted his curse.

"AVADA KE-,"

Harry thought there was no dodging this one, the Death Eater would fire it and he would fly right into it. But then through the immense pain Harry had an idea, a simple idea but a brilliant one. "Accio Broom," said Harry simply.

The man's broom slid out from under him and towards Harry. He let it fly right passed him and fall out of the sky. The Death Eater fell towards the ground screaming all the way. THUD!

Harry could see the castle gates below him. He had made it; he was on the Hogwart's grounds. He flew over the boundary and into safety. Looking back he hoped to see Bellatrix give up the chase. He was wrong. She also flew onto the grounds and continued on towards Harry.

"JUST DIE POTTER," she screamed.

Harry increased his speed towards the castle. He was half way up the drive when Bellatrix drew level to him.

"IT IS FUTILE POTTER. YOU CANNOT FIGHT THE DARK LORD."

"WHAT THE BLUDDY HELL HAVE I JUST BEEN DOING," he shouted through gritted teeth.

Bellatrix's eye's blazed with anger as she pointed her wand at Harry.

"AVADA KEDAVRA."

Harry pulled back on his broom and once again successfully dodged the curse. But he was so exhausted now, it was all too much. He turned left and sped off across the grounds, one last ditch effort. He was no longer heading in the direction of the entrance to the castle but towards the Great Hall. His leg was bleeding badly and he began to feel faint. *I've gotta get inside*, he thought.

Bellatrix was shooting curses from somewhere behind him, he wasn't sure where, his vision had become blurred. He was flying towards a window that he recognized as the one behind the staff table in the Great Hall. His eyes began to feel really heavy as the window grew closer and closer. Harry had begun to slip into unconsciousness when something abruptly woke him up. One of Bellatrix's curses had hit him; the pain was immense as he felt blood trickling down his back. *This is it*, he thought. *I've run my race, it's over...they win.*

Harry looked over his shoulder and saw Bellatrix grinning madly with pleasure as she pointed his wand at him for the final time. *No*, said a little voice in his head, *No, they don't win... they don't... no, no, no....*

"NOOOOO!" shouted Harry, as he turned his head back around just in time to see a pane of glass that belonged to the window of the Great Hall.

"We have lost a great student and man this day," said Dumbledore, "A man that has bared the burdens of a lifetime in his short sixteen years. Harry Potter's death will not be in vain... We must all stick together

through these times if we are to have any hope of overcoming the impending darkness."

The hall was once again quite, apart from Hermione's continued cries. Tears could also be seen rolling down several faces in the room.

"I once again remind you about choosing between what is right and what is easy. If a choice presents itself to you in the future I want you to remember, remember Harry Potter and the choices he made. He chose to fight for what he believed in, he chose-"

Dumbledore's speech was cut short as a crashing sound emanated from above. Something had been hurled through the window above him, shattering it into a hundred pieces.

Harry hadn't expected it. The shards of glass cut his skin as he flew into the hall. He had a brief glimpse of the entire school turning their heads upwards before he felt himself fall from the broom. It seemed to happen in slow motion, taking hours for him to just fall off the broom. He saw the Hall before him. He felt like he had enough time to study every face now looking up at him. Slowly, so slowly he fell. At least it was slow to him. No more than a few seconds to everyone else. Harry saw a table rushing up to meet him. And then everything grew dark. He was unconscious before he hit the table.

The Hall watched as this tattered and weary looking figure fell from his broom. He fell at least twenty metres and landed hard on his back, breaking several ribs, on to the Gryffindor Table. It was enough pain to jolt Harry back to consciousness.

"Agh- aaagghhh...." he cried. Looking wildly around, and wondering where he was. *Was this death?* he thought *Have I died?* But in an instant it all came flooding back to him, everything.

"H- Ha- Harry?"

Turning his head to the left he spotted a familiar face.

"HARRY," shouted Ginny Weasley.

"Not my best landing..." he whispered, before passing out cold. And for a

long time he knew no more.

Chapter 3 - Casualties of War

*Night falls on the eve of battle: another point of
No return. As "darkness crumbles away" into
Daylight, here is the calm before the storm, a
Time of hope and fear and of last minute memories*

--Unknown

"It's okay, Hermione, he's all right," said Ron, as tears again started to appear in Hermione's eyes, a thing that had been happening a lot the past few days.

"Oh, I know. It's just... I thought we'd lost him..." Hermione choked and sniffed on a tissue as she said this.

"Me too! But he's right here, alive and well... maybe not too well... but alive at least."

Ron and Hermione were sitting on the end of Harry's bed in the hospital wing. It had been two days since his rather abrupt arrival and neither had left his side for long.

"How long do you think he'll be asleep for?" asked Ron.

"I don't know? Madam Pomfrey has been keeping him asleep while his leg heals. She said the pain would be terrible if he was awake. I don't know how he made it to the castle like that...."

"His leg looks okay now," said Ron, looking at his best friend's leg wrapped in bandages. *God... he never gets a break* Ron thought. How right he was.

"It feels okay too," whispered Harry weakly.

Ron and Hermione looked up so quickly that Harry thought they might have injured their necks.

"HARRY!" shouted Hermione, throwing herself around Harry's chest.

"Ow- Hermione... ribs... broke."

"Oh sorry," she said quickly, picking herself up.

"How are you, mate?" asked Ron lightly, but Harry could hear the concern in his voice.

"Fine...." replied Harry dryly, not feeling up to discussing much of anything.

"Are- are you sure? You've been through a lot...."

"I know, I know," he said, turning to face Hermione; she had tears rolling down her cheeks. "I'm alright, Hermione, really I am," he continued, seeing the disbelieving look on her face. He knew that he wasn't, but he needed to appear strong. How could he be the hero, the saviour if he snapped...

"Harry... what happened... why did you hit the window?" cried Hermione, breathing heavily between her tears.

"I didn't hit it on purpose," Harry coughed. "It sort of snuck up on me. I was being chased by Death Eaters and...."

Harry recounted the story of his flight from Privet Drive, though tried not to mention the Dursleys too much, it was painful. How he had landed in a forest, had a dream about Voldemort, and how the Death Eaters had chased him right to the window in the Great Hall. When he had finished he looked carefully at Ron and Hermione. Neither of them appeared to have anything to say. They just sat there in shocked silence. Both were crying, Hermione openly, Ron trying to hide it.

"Well... that's what happened," said Harry.

"Harry, you took on *seven* Death Eaters!" whispered Ron, with an awestruck look on his face.

"Yeah... I- I- did," muttered Harry who, now that he was thinking about it, realised he'd caused the death of some of those men. It was an odd feeling, he didn't know them and they were trying to kill him, but....

Hermione seemed to be thinking the same thing. "Harry, you... you killed those Death Eaters...." she said.

"I- I know," he whispered, not quite looking her in the eye.

Hermione seemed to pause a moment, sensing his distress. "Its okay, Harry. It was self defence."

"But I-"

"No, Harry, it was either them or you. You did the right thing," Ron agreed fully with Hermione.

They all sat in silence for a moment, the guilt of the dead once again building up inside Harry, before the doors of the hospital wing opened. In walked Albus Dumbledore who looked a lot better since Harry had returned. He walked over to Harry's bed.

"Professor-" began Harry, but stopped as Dumbledore raised his hands.

"How are you, Harry?" asked Dumbledore.

"I'm all right... just feeling a little worse for the wear."

"I meant mentally, as well as physically." Harry didn't say anything to this, so Dumbledore continued. "Please tell me what happened, Harry."

Harry repeated his story for Dumbledore who sat in silence through the whole thing. Once he had finished Dumbledore surveyed him over his half moon spectacles before speaking.

"You say Sirius came to you in a dream and warned you of the impending attack?" Dumbledore's eyes held no sign of a twinkle, they were deadly serious.

"Yes, I woke up and thought that it was just a dream... but then my scar exploded with pain and I knew he was coming. It had never hurt so much before, it had split and was bleeding," said Harry, raising a hand to his

scar, feeling a slight scab.

"Interesting.... interesting," muttered Dumbledore, his brow furrowed in thought.

"Do you know why I saw Sirius?" asked Harry anxiously.

Dumbledore was silent for a moment. "No, I don't, Harry. I'm afraid the mysteries of death are just that, mysteries."

Harry took this as a typical Dumbledore answer, which was more of another question than the answer Harry wanted, or needed. In the silence that followed Harry found himself thinking about the Dursleys. "Professor the... er... the Dursleys... er... did they... are they really-

Dumbledore sighed. "Yes, Harry. I'm afraid they are... they died instantly. I sent some Aurors to Privet Drive to recover what they could."

Harry stared at Dumbledore. It was as if hearing it from someone else made it final, made it true. He now knew they were truly dead; he had no more family anywhere in the world. True family.... Harry didn't know what to do, what emotion he should feel. Whether he should cry, shout out or break something. He settled on anger and began thinking about what he'd do to Voldemort, the next time they met.

"Their funeral," continued Dumbledore, "is in four days, this Sunday; you are of course permitted to attend... if you wish.

Suddenly Harry lost the feeling of anger and gained one of sadness. He thought for a moment. "What about...."

"Yes, Harry?"

"Well... isn't it supposed to be my funeral as well. I mean, my Uncle Vernon's family knew I lived there, aren't they going to be a bit suspicious if I turn up."

"Yes I had thought of that," said Dumbledore. "But do not worry. The Muggles who knew you lived at Privet Drive have had their memories modified; they believe you were spending the summer at your boarding school and were not in the house at the time of the accident."

"*Accident...*" scoffed Harry, a green fury in his tired eyes.

"The Muggle emergency services believe that the destruction was caused by explosives and fireworks." Dumbledore sighed with century old weariness.

"Fireworks!"

"Several Muggles saw the Dark Mark in the sky. They thought it was a firework, or rather hoped it was."

"Oh...." *That makes sense* thought Harry. "Well I... guess I'll go then," finished Harry quietly. How could he not? They may have not been the nicest of people, but they did take him in. It was also his fault Voldemort attacked... and Dudley had become his friend.

Dumbledore smiled gently. "Very well, Harry. I think it best if you leave Saturday."

"Saturday?" said Harry, "You said the funeral was on Sunday."

"Indeed it is, but I believe that you may need to purchase the proper clothing for a Muggle funeral. In fact, I think you need to buy new robes and books as well."

Harry sighed. "Yeah... yeah I do, they were all destroyed. They were in my trunk at Privet Drive."

"Well that's settled then. I'll arrange to have someone from the Order to go with you, for some extra protection."

"Do you think Remus could come?" Harry asked hopefully.

Dumbledore smiled. "Of course, Harry, I'll talk to him tonight."

Dumbledore got up to leave; he moved away from the bed and down to the small table in front of it. Harry hadn't noticed this table before, but now that he had, he saw that it was piled high with Chocolate Frogs and Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans. "Who are all those from?"

"Get well presents from your admirers in the school," said Dumbledore happily. "Everybody has been rather worried about you; I've been having

to give daily updates on your condition at breakfast."

"The pile was getting really high," said Ron, "so I had to eat some of the frogs to stop it from falling over."

"Good work," laughed Harry, glad for the distraction from reality, as he turned back to Dumbledore. "Would you like a bean, Professor?"

"I believe you know my history with these sweets, Harry," said Dumbledore with a small smile, "but I might try for a coffee cream."

Dumbledore picked up a box of beans and removed a small brown one from within. He looked at it carefully, suspiciously, before placing it slowly in his mouth.

"Oh dear," sighed Dumbledore, "earwax again, I'm afraid."

Harry managed a small smile and Ron and Hermione were still laughing as Dumbledore said goodbye and strode towards the exit. Once he reached the oak door he turned around again.

"You are of course, excused from class for the rest of the week, Harry," he said. "Madam Pomfrey seemed to think it best if you stay off that leg for a few days."

Dumbledore left the Hospital wing, leaving the three of them to talk. Ron had turned his attention back to the huge pile of chocolate frogs, leaving Hermione to talk to Harry.

"Are you sure you're all right?" asked Hermione, putting a hand on his shoulder.

"I'm fine, Hermione, really I am, just feel a bit sore is all." He evaded the real question, but Hermione wasn't about to take it.

"That's not what I meant... I-"

"I know what you meant..." cut in Harry. "The Dursleys... they were my only family... it'll take some time but I'll be alright. I just- Not now... maybe after the funeral... I'll-"

"Harry," laughed Ron. "You'll never believe this, have a look."

Harry turned his attention to Ron at the bottom of the bed. He was looking at a Chocolate Frog card that he had in his hand and laughing.

"What's the matter? It's just a card-"

"Have a look at this," said Ron as he threw the card at Harry.

Harry picked up the card of his sheets, giving Ron a quizzical look before staring dumbly at it. The card's famous witch or wizard was none other than Harry James Potter. He stared at his picture; it was the one that had appeared on the front of The Quibbler last year. A much shorter, skinnier Harry. The photo Harry walked out of the frame, leaving it blank. He turned the card over and read the back.

Harry James Potter

1980 - Present Day

Harry Potter, 'The Boy Who Lived' is best known for his survival of the killing curse on Halloween night 1981. He is the only person in known history to survive the curse. Harry Potter is currently attending Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. He enjoys playing Quidditch for his house team and hopes one day to be an Auror.

"I'm a Chocolate Frog card," he said simply.

"Yep, it doesn't get any better than that," laughed Ron. "It's all downhill from here."

"Can I have a look, Harry?" asked Hermione.

Harry passed her the card and turned to talk to Ron. But just as he did Madam Pomfrey emerged from her office and spotted him.

"Oh, you're awake then," she said as she moved over to Harry. "How do you feel?"

"Er- fine," he said. "All my joints ache though."

"Yes... well that's to be expected with all the bones you broke. Now stay still while I check you over," she said sternly.

Madam Pomfrey removed her wand from inside her robes and pointed it at Harry. She cast a spell and started waving the wand up and down his body. The tip of the wand glowed blue as she passed it over his chest, arms and back. When she got to his leg the tip changed from blue to dark red.

"Hmm...." she muttered.

"What's the matter?" asked Hermione, biting her bottom lip. "Is that normal?"

"Do you know what curse hit this leg, Potter?"

Harry thought for a moment, no; he hadn't heard the name of the curse. "No...." said Harry. "Why?"

"Oh, it's nothing too serious... there was just some magic in that curse that's slowing down the healing."

"Is there anything you can do?" he asked hopefully.

"You're just going to have to give it time to heal. A few weeks and it'll be as good as new," she answered.

"But I have to go to... to a funeral on Sunday, can I walk on it?"

"Yes, but you'll have to stay off it for the next few days, and when you do walk you'll have to put your weight on your left leg. I'll also have to give you a cane to walk with."

"A *cane*... how long will I need that for?" asked Harry, not much liking the idea.

"Just a week or two," said Madam Pomfrey.

"Great...." sighed Harry. "I'm stuck in this bed 'til Saturday and I have to walk with a cane."

"I'm afraid so, Potter, but it's for your own good," Madam Pomfrey said with a sense of finality.

"Yeah... but-"

"No buts."

Madam Pomfrey finished checking Harry over in silence. Her wand tip stayed blue for the remainder of the spell. She left muttering something about *'never having a student spend so much time injured, just like his father and his friends'* and returned to her office.

"What am I going to do here until Saturday?" Harry asked aloud, not wanting to be left alone with his memories and thoughts.

"Don't know, mate, but we'll pop in whenever we can, won't we, Hermione."

"Of course we will," Hermione said.

"You're not staying?" Harry asked, unable to keep the hurt out of his voice.

"We've got to go back to class. McGonagall said that we could stay with you until you woke up but then it's back to life as usual," Ron said with a sigh.

Harry nodded with understanding. "Oh... okay."

"You'll find something to do," Ron assured him.

"Yeah... Oh! Where's my wand?"

"It's here, Harry," said Hermione. "Along with the cloak, map and your broom."

Hermione picked up a white cloth bag that lay next to his bed and passed it to Harry. Inside were his wand, map, and cloak.

"And your broom is here," she said, picking it up off the floor.

Harry nodded. "I'll have to buy a new trunk. Can you keep it in yours for about a week, Ron?"

"Sure thing," Ron said, grasping the broom and rubbing at a scratch along the wooden shaft.

A comfortable silence fell between the three of them that was only broken when the loud ringing of the bell that hailed the end of lunch rang throughout the castle.

"You don't have to leave now, do you?" Harry asked, a little hopefully.

"No, we'll stay for today," Hermione whispered with a tired smile.

Despite it all Harry now smiled himself. "Thank you," he said sincerely, his good arm coming to rest on his chest. It took him a moment to realise something was missing. "Oh, where's the watch, Ron?"

"It's on the bedside table there," said Ron, pointing to a table to Harry's left.

"This is a really great watch," he whispered, putting it around his neck. "And it definitely works." He thought about it just before the attack, how his hand had landed on *Mortal Peril* in the briefest of warnings. "Thanks a lot."

"It wasn't just from me, it was from everyone at home... Oh! That reminds me, Mum and Dad owled, they wanted to wish you a 'speedy recovery'," quoted Ron.

"That was nice of them."

"Yeah... they also said they might pop in later in the week, see how you're doing. Do you wanna play some chess?"

"All right," Harry agreed, stretching his sore leg and wincing painfully as it protested to this movement.

For the rest of the afternoon Harry played chess with Ron while Hermione read *The Standard Book of Spells Grade Six*. It was a good way for him not to have to talk about his problems yet... he just wasn't ready. After the lessons finished for the day Hermione and Ron said that they were going down to the Great Hall to get some dinner, leaving Harry alone. Having nothing better to do, he decided to watch their progress on the Marauder's Map. He picked up his wand and the parchment.

"I solemnly swear that I am up to no good."

Lines of ink started whirling their way across the parchment until every known corner of the castle was drawn. Harry watched the small dots of Ron and Hermione as they made their way down to the Great Hall. Most of the students were congregating there now. Harry watched as another small dot walked through the castle and up to the hospital wing.

"All righ', Harry?" asked Hagrid as he walked through the door.

"Hi, Hagrid," said Harry.

"Are yeh doin' alrigh' now?" the half-giant asked again.

"I'm fine."

"No yer not, but you will be." Hagrid sighed. "I 'spect yer'll be off school for the week."

"Yeah... I've got nothing to do for three days."

"Oh well, sure yer'll find somethin'."

Harry spent the next hour talking to Hagrid. "I've go' some intrestin' creatures for yer this year," he said. "Tha' is... you still doin' Care o' Magical Creatures?" he asked hopefully.

"Of course I am."

"That's good, what else yer doin'?"

"I- I don't know. I have to choose what I'm doing for NEWTS, don't I?"

"Yeah, yer do. Should hav' chosen the other nigh' but.... yer were held up in here. Professor McGonagall will probably be roun' with yer selection form soon, though."

Ron and Hermione returned ten minutes later. The four of them talked until nine, all avoiding the subject of how Harry felt. They could tell he didn't want to talk yet. Eventually Ron and Hermione had to get back to Gryffindor Tower, as the curfew was in place. They said their goodbyes to Harry and promised to visit him tomorrow. It was just him and Hagrid now.

"I be'er be goin' too," he said. "Gotta feed, Fang."

"Oh... alright," replied Harry. "I'll see you soon."

Hagrid left the hospital wing just as Madam Pomfrey came out of her office.

"You need to sleep, Potter."

"Okay..." he mumbled. Now that Harry was on his own, he only had his thoughts for company, and they were dark. He kept replaying the devastating events of the past few years of his life in his mind. *Kill the spare... Cedric. The veil... Sirius. And now the Dursleys.... I'm sorry.* As these thoughts clouded his mind, he slowly became overwhelmed and fell into a restless sleep. But his dream were filled with the same horrible images, he woke up several times during the night, never having rest from the nightmares.

For the next few days Harry spent his time either with Ron and Hermione, opening up some of the two hundred or so Chocolate Frogs, or watching the small dots on the map move around the castle. He felt he had to do something to keep himself occupied and not have to think about the past, which had irrevocably changed his present and future.

Early Thursday morning, when everybody else was in class for the day, Harry was staring idly into space when the Hospital doors opened. In walked Mrs. Weasley. She quickly scanned the room and caught site of Harry. "Oh, Harry, dear," she said as she walked over to him.

"Hello, Mrs. Weasley," replied Harry as he was enveloped in a big hug. "How are you?"

"Oh I'm fine, but you...."

Harry knew what she was getting at, but he wasn't ready... not yet. "Don't worry about me. Just had a bit of a rough broom ride, is all...."

Molly Weasley had been taking care of teenage boys pretty much full time for twenty years, she knew Harry was a wreck. "Okay, dear. If you ever need to talk, though."

"I'll know where to go."

When the bell rang for lunch, Harry watched the dots of Ron and Hermione move up to the Hospital wing on the map. Mrs. Weasley was fascinated by the map. Harry explained it was made by his father and friends back when they were in school.

Soon enough his friends arrived. Ron was surprised to see his mum, and asked where his dad was. "He had to work, Ron. But he wishes you well, Harry." When lunch was over Ron and Hermione left, as did Mrs. Weasley. All of them wishing Harry well but noticing the black rings of pain his eyes seemed to hold.

It was about lunch time on Friday, and having just opened his 150th Chocolate Frog (he now had fifteen cards with himself on the front), Harry was getting rather bored. He was just about to stare at the map again when the hospital doors opened and in walked....

"Professor McGonagall," Harry said.

"Ah, Potter, I do hope you're feeling well?" the elderly witch replied.

"Yeah, I'm fine," said Harry lazily.

"I have here your selection form for NEWT studies," she said. "I believe you need to know what books you need to buy tomorrow."

"Yep."

"Do you still plan on pursuing a career as an Auror?"

Harry blinked, not really caring. "That's what it says on my Chocolate Frog card," he stated tiredly.

For a split second Harry saw the corners of her mouth turn up in what could have been a smile, but she corrected it quickly. "Ahem," she coughed. "I thought you might, your OWL results get you into all of the courses required for Auror training apart from Potions, but I've had a word with Professor Snape and he's agreed to take you on."

"Oh... that's great," said Harry bitterly. He had his problems with Snape.

Ignoring the tone in his voice, Professor McGonagall continued, "So... that will be Potions, Charms, Transfiguration, Divination, yes Potter

Divination, and Defence Against the Dark Arts."

"Who's teaching DADA?"

"Professor Dumbledore couldn't find anyone to fill that position, so he is teaching that class until further notice."

"Dumbledore's teaching!"

"Yes, Potter, he is. So that will be all then. I'll just write a list of the books you will need."

"I also want to do Care of Magical Creatures," Harry said adamantly.

"All right, Harry."

Professor McGonagall removed a piece of parchment and an eagle feather quill from within her robes and began to write. When she had finished she handed the parchment to Harry.

"There you are, Potter; I expect to see you Monday morning for Transfiguration. Goodbye."

"Goodbye," he called after her as she left the hospital.

He looked at his new list of books, eight in all:

The Standard Book of Spells (Grade 6) by Miranda Goshawk

Advanced Magical Theory by Adalbert Waffling

Advanced Transfiguration by Emeric Switch

Advanced Charms by Brumhilda Goadly

Advanced Potions by Arsenius Jiger

A Guide to Advanced Divination by Cassandra Vablatsky

Magical Creatures: NEWT Level by Darius Bluetooth

The Dark Arts: An Advanced Study by Albus Dumbledore

"Dumbledore wrote a book," Harry said to himself as he finished reading

the list. "Should be good."

Harry was looking at the cloudy grey sky out of an open window on the other side of the room. A slight breeze was blowing in that was rather chilly, he didn't want to risk getting up himself and Madam Pomfrey wasn't around. He was trying to think of a solution to this problem when he heard a familiar screech and saw something fly in through the window.

"Hedwig," said Harry. "I'd completely forgotten-"

Hedwig flew down to Harry's bed and gave his finger an affectionate peck. Harry stroked the back of her neck and she gave a contented hoot before flying off back out the window to the Owlery.

"I'm glad you're okay," he called after her.

Harry spent the rest of the afternoon, while Ron and Hermione were in lessons, counting the number of tiles on the roof.... 1,681. When the bell rang for the end of the day he eagerly awaited for Ron and Hermione to come up from dinner. He looked around as the door to the Hospital wing opened and expected to see Ron and Hermione but instead he found Remus Lupin.

"Harry."

"Remus?" Harry replied, slightly confused. He hadn't expected to see his former professor.

Lupin walked over to Harry's bed and let out a heavy sigh. "You don't know what a relief it was to hear you were alive," he finally said.

"Yeah I was happy I was alive as well."

"I expect you were," laughed Remus.

"So you're coming with me tomorrow?"

"Yes I am, we leave early in the morning. Taking the Knight Bus to Diagon Alley."

"That's good; I can't wait to get out of this bed," Harry said with

eagerness that bordered on longing.

"You can get out now, Potter," said Madam Pomfrey who had left her office and walked up the aisle to him.

"Hello, Poppy," said Remus.

"Remus, how are you?"

"Oh, as well as to be expected."

"Good to hear, good to hear. Now, Potter, let's see how you do on that leg of yours."

Harry nodded and slowly sat up in bed, his bones and joints felt stiff from not moving in so long of a time. He carefully turned and let his legs fall down to the floor.

"Now, Potter, I want you to get up using your left leg."

Harry nodded again and gently pulled himself up out of the bed, leaning heavily on his left leg, which gave him a lopsided look.

"Good, now carefully put a little weight on your right leg."

Harry did so. He lowered his leg to the floor and slowly started to straighten himself up until....

"Argh- Ow," he cried, before collapsing back on to the bed.

Madam Pomfrey nodded. "You're definitely going to need that cane; I'll just go fetch it."

She retreated back up the aisle and into her office, leaving Harry and Remus to talk.

"Does it hurt much?" Lupin asked.

"Actually it hasn't hurt until now, when I tried to walk," Harry replied, resting against the bed.

"Well practice makes perfect. I probably had best leave you alone to try, I'm staying in the Visitor's rooms tonight and I'll be in early tomorrow, so

get some rest."

"All right, Remus, see you tomorrow."

Remus left just as Madam Pomfrey returned carrying a brown cane with an ivory handle. "Here you are, Potter," she said. "Now let's try walking again."

Harry spent the rest of the evening learning how to walk with the cane. Ron and Hermione appeared halfway through but were quickly ushered out by Madam Pomfrey. At about ten o'clock he was pretty confident with the cane and could walk the length of the hospital with only a dull ache in his leg.

"G-G-Good, Potter," yawned Madam Pomfrey. "I think that's fine, you can walk well enough now, goodnight."

She left the Hospital wing presumably going to the Staff Quarter's. Harry climbed back into bed. Keeping the pain and guilt hidden during the day was one thing, but when Harry fell asleep his dreams were plagued with the faces of the dead. He saw Voldemort reborn from the cauldron. The green light envelope Cedric. Sirius falling through the veil. The destruction of Privet Drive, and more recently a nightmare about Dudley.

Harry would be standing in his room at Privet Drive, everything would be in flames. It seemed so real, he could smell the smoke and feel the heat of the crackling fire. He'd turn around and see Dudley, except he was covered in blood and pieces of his flesh were torn open and burnt, hanging loosely from his face. Dudley would just stand there and stare at Harry, who was begging for forgiveness. At this point Harry usually woke in a cold sweat, and to a burning scar.

"Harry... Harry.... HARRY!"

"Whatyuwant?" said Harry sleepily.

"Come on get up, we're going," said Remus.

"Errr... whatimesit?"

"Six, now get up."

Harry rolled over in bed and looked up at Remus. He had his wand held alight and was carrying a package. Harry picked himself up out of the bed and reached for his cane. He made ready to go but then....

"Remus, I haven't got ant robes, only these pyjamas."

"I know, here, take this," he said passing Harry the parcel he was carrying. "Nothing too spectacular... just some plain black robes."

"Cheers," said Harry as he took the parcel and began to change.

Once he had finished he picked up his watch and put it around his neck, then he pocketed his wand and the Marauder's Map. He limped over to Lupin, ignoring the pain in his leg and followed him out of the room.

As they walked through the long, empty corridors of Hogwart's, Lupin told him the plan for the day.

"How's your leg?" Remus asked, stopping for the second time to allow Harry to catch up.

"Hurts a bit...."

"I'll go slower," Remus said with concern.

"Thanks."

"So... today. We're going to Diagon Alley on the Knight Bus, that'll take about an hour. Then I thought we could get breakfast at The Leaky Cauldron while we wait for the shops to open, then we do all the shopping. After lunch I thought we could go out into Muggle London to buy you a suit for... for the funeral."

"Sounds good," muttered Harry.

They walked the rest of the way in silence, the only sound was the dull thud of Harry's cane on the floor. He limped slowly down the stairs to the Entrance Hall and over to the castle doors.

"I'll get it," said Lupin, moving ahead to the doors and opening them.

Once outside they proceeded to move down the steps and onto the drive. It was still pretty cold outside; the sun was just rising, which was casting

a pale light on everything. The grass was still heavy with dew and the clouds were low in the sky. Looking across to the lake, Harry could see the giant squid gliding gracefully over the surface.

"Cold morning," Remus commented as he threw out his wand arm.

"Yeah...." muttered Harry, as the giant purple Knight Bus appeared before them.

The doors opened and out stepped Stan Shunpike, still as pimply as ever.

"Welcome to the Knigh- Oh 'ello, Neville," said Stan with a wink.

"Hi, Stan," replied Harry, as he and Lupin got on the bus.

"Where to today, lads?" asked Stan.

"Diagon Alley, the Leaky Cauldron."

"That'll be one Galleon, twelve Sickles," said Stan.

Remus handed over some coins, whispered something to Stan, and then ushered Harry into some seats near the door. They sat down and with a small bang, the bus was rattling down the M1.

"Gave Stan a little extra coin. We should be there in about ten minutes," Remus said quietly, mindful of the other patrons on the bus.

"That's good; I can't stand all this bumping," Harry winced as his leg was knocked back and forth.

Ten minutes later the Knight Bus pulled to a stop outside The Leaky Cauldron. Harry and Lupin descended the steps of the bus, muttered a thanks and goodbye to Stan and made their way to the pub.

"Actually," said Harry, "can we go to Gringott's first?"

"Sure... this way then."

Harry followed Remus down the empty street of Diagon Alley. All the stores were closed, not due to open for another hour or two. The street was deathly quiet and Harry found himself gripping his wand inside his

robes. But the walk to Gringott's was uneventful and they were soon being let in by the goblin at the door. The bank was as busy as if it was midday; all the goblin clerks were counting Galleons or examining jewels. Harry and Remus began walking over to a free goblin.

"Does this place ever close?" asked Harry.

"No, it's open all day, everyday. Except for Goblin holidays, that is."

Harry nodded and then wondered what a Goblin would celebrate. "Oh wait, Remus... I- I don't have my key... it was in my trunk."

"Not to worry, those keys are magical. If it was destroyed a new one would have appeared here."

They reached the counter and the goblin looked up from what he was doing. "Yes?" he said.

"Mr. Harry Potter, is here to make a withdrawal and currency exchange," Lupin stated.

"Ahh... Mr. Potter," the goblin said, turning to Harry. "Yes... we have your new key here." The goblin clicked his fingers and a small gold key appeared in his hand. "Here you are. Now a withdrawal, how much do you wish to withdraw?"

Harry thought for a moment, he decided to get enough to last well into the school year. "Oh, I'd say about 175 galleons, plus another fifty converted into Muggle pounds please," said Harry.

"Very Well. The mine cart doesn't run this early in the morning, but I will remove the money from the safe on this floor and the galleons will be deducted from your vault later today, okay?"

"Fine."

The goblin lowered himself from the chair and disappeared behind the counter. He walked over to the vault in the far corner of the room. He returned five minutes later carrying three bulging Galleon packets and a roll of Muggle pounds. "Here you are Mr Potter, 175 Galleons and fifty converted into Muggle money, which is three hundred and fifty pounds

with the current exchange rate. Please sign here."

Harry signed the withdrawal parchment and collected his money, putting the bags safely inside his robes (with difficulty). *I need a wallet*, he thought, as he and Remus turned and left the bank.

After walking (Harry limping) back up the road to the Leaky Cauldron, Lupin and Harry entered the pub. It was the same as ever... dark and shabby. A few wizards were sitting in a corner passed out on the table and an old witch was drinking something that looked like pure smoke, other than that the pub was empty.

"TOM?" shouted Lupin. "ARE YOU THERE, TOM?"

Tom the Innkeeper came bustling through the back door of the bar. He appeared holding a copy of the Prophet. "Ah... Lupin, have you heard? The Potter boy's alive."

"Yes, Tom, I know... in fact... Tom, say hello."

Harry who had previously been standing behind Remus limped out. He saw Tom's face widen in shock and do a sort of a little jumpy thing.

"Hello, Tom," laughed Harry.

"M- Mr. Potter," stuttered Tom.

"Could we get some breakfast, Tom?" asked Remus.

"Oh... Of course, come through to the parlour... are bacon, eggs, and sausages fine?"

"Fine, Tom," Harry and Remus replied in unison.

Sitting down at the wooden table in the parlour while Tom went and got their breakfast, Remus and Harry discussed topics that they were unable to in the openness of the pub. This small backroom was well protected against eavesdroppers though.

"Tom's a member of the Order, by the way...." whispered Lupin.

"Tom!" Harry exclaimed. "Why?"

"He sees a lot in this pub, he's valuable to our side."

"Oh...." Harry sat in silence for a moment. "I didn't know that the Prophet knew I nearly copped it."

"Yeah... the story got out somehow... but it appears they've only just learned you're alive, isn't that odd? Considering you've been back amongst the living for five days."

"Probably thought my death would sell better," said Harry.

Harry turned as the door opened and Tom returned with plates of food and mugs of juice. "That be all gents?" he asked.

"Actually could we get two rooms for tonight please, Tom," Remus said, placing some gold in the barman's hand.

"Of course, numbers three and four are free. I'll have them set up now, excuse me."

An hour later Harry and Remus made ready to go, they said a brief goodbye to Tom on their way out and were soon back on Diagon Alley. The street was now teeming with wizards and witches. All the shops had opened and everything was in full swing.

"Where to first then, Harry?" asked Lupin, mindful of Harry's cane.

"I think I should go buy a trunk, to put everything-"

Harry stopped talking and turned to his left, he had seen something out of the corner of his eye, and sure enough there, in the middle of the street was a giant canary. Behind the canary was a shop that wasn't there the last time he'd been in Diagon Alley... Weasley's Wizard Wheezes.

"Oh! Come on," he said to Remus cheerfully. "We have to go in there."

Harry and Remus crossed the street and entered the shop. It was full of people bustling around and buying Fred and George's products. Harry's first impression was of a giant red box, all four walls were painted flame red and the ceiling looked as if it was actually on fire, the wallpaper was one of burning flames. He walked around the shop looking at all the

various items for sale. Fred and George had really branched out on some their products.

"HARRY! OY GEORGE, ITS HARRY, GET OUT 'ERE."

Harry turned and saw the two Weasley twins make a beeline for him through the throng of customer and exploding products that littered the shop.

"Hi Fred, George," he said, nodding to the twins.

"Harry, mate, how are you? Glad you're alive. We knew they'd never get you.... but you had us worried."

Fred and George gave Harry a look that said that it was his own fault for being attacked.

"How's business?" Harry asked, looking around the store.

"Business is booming!" said George. "Galleons are rolling in, we've already bought premises in Hogsmeade, and we're working on something very special that'll make us a fortune."

"Really, what?" asked Remus, standing back as one of the many customers started sprouting carrots in their hair.

"Hello, Lupin, we didn't see you there," Fred said.

"Sorry but we can't tell you what we're working on, but you'll find out soon enough at Hogwarts... maybe at Christmas.... but if not then, definitely before Easter," George said.

"Promised Dumbledore we'd keep it a surprise," Fred said.

"Everyone will love it though. What are you doing here anyway, Harry?"

"Oh... I'm here to buy a few things, long day ahead of us... as a matter of fact we'd better get going."

Fred and George nodded, slapping Harry on the back. "Okay, drop by anytime... and look out for us next Hogsmeade weekend."

"Should have the new shop up and running by then. Oh, Harry, take

some of these."

George handed Harry a small white bag full of little round silver balls. Harry took them cautiously. "What are they?" he asked.

"Invisibility Balls, eat one and you turn invisible for two minutes. They were going to be our new product but Dumbledore said they'd come in handy for the Order... so he bought our entire year's stock of them. Told us it would probably be better if we sold them only to him, said they would be too useful in the wrong hands."

Harry nodded. "Thanks, I'll see you soon."

"Take care, Harry."

"Don't go falling off any more broomsticks," laughed Fred.

Harry and Lupin exited the shop and walked back out on to Diagon Alley. They continued down the street until they came to the Wizardry Supply store. Inside Harry re-bought some of his lost possessions. He and Lupin emerged ten minutes later carrying a new trunk, cauldron, dragon hide gloves, potion phials, and a set of brass scales.

"It's going to be difficult carrying all this around," said Harry. "Especially with my cane."

"How about you put everything inside the trunk and I'll take it back to your room at the Leaky Cauldron. You can do whatever else you need to do and I'll meet you there for lunch, sound good?"

Harry thought for a moment and then nodded. He felt as if Remus was putting a lot of trust in him by letting him roam free around the Alley. "That sounds great; I'll see you in a few hours, Remus."

Remus nodded and started levitating the trunk up the street back to the pub. Harry turned and looked around. *Where to next?* he thought.

He decided that Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions was closest and began to limp towards her shop, but on the way, something else caught his eye. It was a place he had past many times before, but never really considered going into. *Why not?* he thought, and began limping

over to Cecilia's Cutting Shed and Piercing Palace.

Harry entered the hairdressers and was immediately knocked back by the strong smell of incense burning in the shop. It reminded him heavily of the Divination tower at Hogwarts. The walls of the shop were covered in pictures of wizards and witches showing their new haircut or piercing. There was a large mirror on the far wall and several chairs with hairdressing and piercing equipment next to them, cabinets lined the walls filled with studs and rings for piercings, and there was also a desk with a small witch standing behind it, reading a magazine.

Harry limped over to the woman slowly. She had waist length blonde hair that seemed to change shades of colour as she moved her head. Her face was heavily pierced in every place imaginable (eyebrows, nose, ears, tongue, lip). He approached the desk.

"Er..."

The woman looked up. "Hello, can I help you?"

Harry stared at her for a moment and then ran a hand through the mop of hair on his head. "I- I was wondering if I could get a haircut."

"Certainly," she smiled. "Follow me."

She led Harry over to the large mirror on the wall and placed him in front of it. "Now stand here and look into the mirror," she said.

Harry did so and watched his own reflection for a moment, nothing seemed to happen. "Why ar-"

"Right now, let's see," said the mirror. "How about this?"

The mirror shimmered and Harry's reflection changed. It was still him but with a new hair style, he now had a spiky gel effect in his hair.

"No I don't think so," said the mirror. "Try this one."

The mirror shimmered again and this time his hair style was.... nothing. He didn't have a single hair on his head. The woman next to him gasped when she saw the scar on his bald head, but she quickly recovered.

"No, no, no," laughed the mirror, "what was I thinking.... here, try this one."

The enchanted mirror shimmered for the third time and the style that came out suited him perfectly. His hair was short on the sides and didn't cover his ears, it was shorter on top as well, pushed back and up. He no longer had his fringe covering the scar, it was visible to anyone who looked but that didn't matter, he liked this style and so did the mirror. He would no longer look like a frightened little boy with his hair sticking up, but his own person.

"Yes... that's the one, I always get it right in the end," the mirror said, sounding pleased with itself.

"You like that one... Mr. Potter?" asked the witch carefully.

"Yes," said Harry, realising that this would be the first time he had a haircut he actually wanted.

"Very well, sit down over here please."

Harry sat down in a leather chair while the woman pulled out her wand and muttered a spell. Scissors appeared out of the end of the wand and she began to cut his hair. It was all over in ten minutes, the hairdresser's hands a blur on his head. When she was finished, Harry looked into the normal mirror and smiled slightly. His hair looked exactly like it had in the enchanted mirror.

"Thanks," he said. "It looks great."

"It suits you," the hairdressing witch replied, smiling politely.

Harry got up out of the chair and grabbed his cane; he limped over to the desk and handed over three galleons to the witch. After saying his thanks and goodbye, he turned to leave but something caught his eye in one of the glass display cabinets. On a velvet pillow, in the centre of a large wooden framed case was a small golden earring. It was in the same shape as the creature on the book Hagrid had sent him for his birthday, a lion with wings. It hung on a chain with only a few links, so that it would dangle down about a centimetre from his earlobe.

"You like that one?" asked the young witch who had appeared behind him. "I picked it up off a tradesman in Egypt, the animal there is a Griffin."

"A Griffin...." Harry whispered to himself. He felt drawn to the animal but he couldn't think of a reason why.

"Do you want me to pierce your ear?" the sales witch then asked.

Harry thought for a moment. He would never have imagined getting his ear pierced, the only lads at Hogwart's who had were Dean, because of his Muggle background and Seamus, because he had lost a bet to Dean. He was about to decline but the ring drew his gaze, he couldn't help it. "Yeah... and I'd like that earring."

"That is a nice choice, pure 24 carat gold, the man in Egypt said that it had some magical properties as well, but he didn't know what they were... anyway... twelve Galleons and it's all yours."

Harry emerged from the shop twenty minutes later sporting his new haircut and earring. He continued on to his original destination of the robe shop. On his way, he couldn't help but notice all the people that were staring at him and talking in hushed whispers.

"Look dear, it's Harry Potter!"

"Why's he got that cane... what happened to his leg?"

"Harry Potter, over there..."

"He looks different from his picture."

"I can see the scar."

"Poor dear... was nearly killed by You-Know-Who the other day."

Harry was used to these whispers by now, having already endured six years of them. But today there seemed to be a lot more of them. The only reason he could come up with was that his scar must be really noticeable now he had no hair covering it. He also noticed all the looks he was getting from the young female population of the crowd.

"HARRY? Harry, is that you?"

Harry looked over at the entrance to Madam Malkin's. Standing there was Angelina Johnson. Harry had played Quidditch with Angelina on the Gryffindor House team for all his years at Hogwarts. She was an excellent Chaser.

"Hello, Angelina," he said, limping over to her. "How are you?"

"I'm fine... but look at you, you look great," she exclaimed.

"Thanks," said Harry, feeling himself blush. "What are you doing here?"

"I work here at Madam Malkin's," Angelina replied happily. "It's a job," she shrugged.

"That's good... I'm here to buy some new robes, actually."

"Ooohhh!" she said excitedly, grabbing him by the arm and pulling him into the shop. "Here let me get your size." Angelina pushed Harry onto a stool and started taking his measurements, when she measured his leg he gave a small wince of pain.

"Er- Angelina, could you be careful round my leg... it's a bit sore."

Angelina nodded. "I wondered about that cane, what happened?"

While Angelina continued measuring him and pinning up his robes, Harry told her the story of his fight with the Death Eaters, leaving out some of the finer details. When he had finished she looked up.

"You're so brave, Harry," she said simply.

Harry sighed. "Brave? Nah... I was scared stupid, it was luck that got me through to Hogwarts, just luck," he said seriously.

"Luck... did luck get you through all the dangerous things you've done at Hogwart's these past six years? You *killed* a basilisk for Merlin's sake!"

"Well I-"

"No it didn't. You're a powerful wizard, Harry... and a damn good looking one," she said, kissing him on the cheek before blushing profusely. "Well... er... I'll just go wrap your robes."

"Okay...." replied Harry dryly, as he stepped down off the stool.

Angelina returned five minutes later carrying four brown packages, wrapped and tied with string. Harry followed her back around to the counter, through a long stand of robes and past a family of four.

"That'll be sixteen Galleons, Harry."

Harry handed over the coins to Angelina, he was just about to leave the shop but she came running round the counter and put a hand on his shoulder.

"What-" he said, but stopped when he saw tears in her eyes.

"Harry, I... I'm scared," she said quietly.

"Scared?"

"Of the war.... of- of... You-Know-Who." Harry didn't quite know what to say. If truth be told he was a little scared to. But he realised why she was telling him this. She thought he wasn't scared of Voldemort. "I know this must sound stupid to you... but-"

"It doesn't sound stupid to me...." Harry interrupted her quickly. "I'm scared, everyone is scared but that's what Voldemort wants," he ignored the squeak of fear and continued. "We can't let him see that fear though... he'll use it against us...."

Angelina was now sobbing against his shoulder. "Will- will you fight him, Harry?" she whispered desperately.

"Yes," he said strongly, thinking of the prophecy. "I will fight him... I will."

"But what if you die?"

"Then I'll die... but I'm not going to stand back and let him take over. I can't do nothing while he kills innocent people."

Angelina stopped crying and looked up at him. "You are brave, Harry... you're the bravest person I know." She kissed him on the cheek again and turned and headed into the back room, leaving Harry standing there.

For a moment Harry stood in silence, watching her retreat. "You'll be all

right," he said to himself, before turning and leaving the shop.

Outside the sun was dazzlingly bright and hot for the beginning weeks of autumn. He looked at his wristwatch and with a small surprise realised that he had been in the robe shop for more than an hour. It was eleven thirty and he was supposed to meet Remus at the pub in half an hour. */ better hurry and buy my books*, he thought.

Harry made his way up the street to Flourish and Blotts and entered the shop. The bookstore was much the same as ever, the shelves were stacked to the ceiling with books of all shapes and sizes. He was the only customer. Harry limped over to the sales assistant, the pain in his leg worsening; he had been on it too long and needed to rest.

"Hi," he said to the sales assistant.

"Can I help you?" the man asked without looking up at Harry. He was reading one of the many books in the store.

"I need these books please," Harry said, as he passed him the piece of parchment with the book names on, which had been written by McGonagall.

"Okay...." the man drawled looking up at Harry and then doing a double take as his eyes flickered to his scar. "Right away."

Harry sat on a chair while the man searched the store for his books. He returned some twenty minutes later carrying them and apologised for taking so long.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said. "But we usually put all Hogwarts books away once the term has started."

"That's all right," replied Harry. "How much?"

"For these eight that'll be... nine galleons, five sickles."

Harry paid the man and left the store. He was glad he had no more stops to make, the bag with his robes and books in was really heavy and he had started to feel the strain in his arm. He began to walk up the street to the Leaky Cauldron, but something happened then that he would

remember for the rest of his life.

The bright autumn sun had dimmed, as if it was about to set, but it was only twelve in the afternoon. He didn't notice it at first but then the cold set in. Harry felt them before he saw them. His entire body had gone cold and he could hear his mother's last words in his head. *No, he thought, not here... not now... don't let them come.....* Harry choked on the cold and looked around; nobody else seemed to be affected yet. Some had pulled their cloaks closer around themselves, but that was all.

And then it happened. Out of the immense darkness thirty or so Dementors appeared. Harry fell to his knees clutching his chest. He was so cold. As the high pitched laughter filled his head, he dropped his bag and pulled out his wand. Looking around he could see that the Dementors were now affecting other people on the street. Several people fell to the ground, some screamed.

Harry watched as the Dementors blocked off the street from both sides, trapping fifty or so people between them, casting a section of the street into an impenetrable darkness. About twenty Dementors coming from the left, a dozen to the right. Harry was one of the people trapped. Fighting against the cold he raised his wand, and thinking of the happiest thought he could come up with, he shouted:

"EXPECTO PATRONUM!"

Nothing happened, not even a silvery wisp issued from his wand. He frowned and shook his head to clear it. *Come on he thought. Happy thought... Ron, Hermione..*

"EXPECTO PATRONUM!"

Harry's Patronus burst out of the end of his wand. Immediately he regained himself, felt the warmth seeping through his entire body.... but he couldn't savour it for long. "Over there," he pointed. The stag galloped through the air, leaving a silvery trail in its wake, and over to a group of five Dementors who had lowered their hoods to five people below them. The stag knocked the Dementors away, sending them backwards and into darkness, where they disappeared.

"Good, now that way, Prongs," Harry managed, shaking his head to keep his mind clear.

Prongs leapt through the air, leaving another whispery silver trail behind him, and into another group of Dementors. Harry directed him back and forth; so far no one had been hurt.

"Is that them all?" asked Harry to himself, as the street began to brighten with the Dementors retreat. But no... He could still faintly hear his mother's screams, he turned, *where-*

Harry stopped abruptly and felt his heart skip a few beats in his chest, cornered against the front wall of Flourish and Blotts was a family of four. The same he had brushed past in the robe shop only half an hour ago. A witch and wizard and two young children, no more than six or seven. The parents were trying to push their children behind them, to safety, but to no avail. Four Dementors were leaning over them, their hoods already down ready to administer the fatal kiss.

"NOOOO," shouted Harry. "PRONGS, THERE, NOW!"

The stag burst across the street at an amazing speed, but it was too late. Harry could tell Prongs would never reach them in time. He watched as the Dementors sucked the souls out of the parents and their children. It was a hideous, scarring sight and all happiness left him. Prongs faded away as the Dementors let fall the bodies of their victims. It then truly hit home to Harry that they were at war.

"EXPECTO PATRONUM!"

Harry looked to his left; someone other than him had just conjured a Patronus. He watched as a silver wolf attacked the Dementors and sent them into the darkness, where they truly belonged. It was as if someone had flicked on a light switch; the sun returned in full force amidst the screams of people on the street. Several pops were heard as someone pulled Harry up by his arm.

"You okay, Harry?" asked Remus, regretting his decision to let Harry wander around Diagon Alley alone.

"Remus- you- you cast that Patronus?"

"Yes that was mine.... if only I'd gotten here a minute earlier though," he said, looking at the soulless family.

"What happened, Lupin?" asked a familiar voice.

Harry and Remus turned around on their heels quickly. Standing behind them was Kingsley Shacklebolt, who was flanked by five or six other Aurors. They stood impressively in their white robes, wands drawn and eyes narrowed.

"Dementors, Kingsley..." said Lupin sadly.

"D- Dementors here! In Diagon Alley..."

"Yes, Harry here fought them off with his Patronus, but still...."

Kingsley looked down at Harry for the first time. "Are you okay, Harry?" he asked.

"I'm fine, but...." Harry trailed off and looked over at Flourish and Blotts, where the four soulless victims lay.

Kingsley followed his gaze and sighed. "Huh... Dawlish, Atherson... please go see to that."

Two of the Aurors broke away from the pack and walked over to Flourish and Blotts. A crowd of people had gathered now and several were applauding Harry for what he did. But Harry didn't want to stay.

"Remus... can we go?" he whispered, leaning heavily on his good leg. The pain in his injured one was becoming unbearable.

"Of course, Harry... come on." Remus picked up Harry's bag and cane. He passed the cane to Harry and they began to leave, but Kingsley called back to them.

"You saved a lot of lives today, Harry," he said. "I'll make sure the Ministry knows what happened." Kingsley turned away and tried to make the crowd disperse.

Harry and Remus walked back up to the Leaky Cauldron in silence. They dodged all the questions from the people in the bar and Tom

rushed them into their private room in the back.

"I'll go get some lunch," said Tom.

Harry sat down at the table in silence, thinking about the children who had lost their souls to a war that shouldn't have to be fought. He was horrified and angry. The world truly was at war, and he was on the front lines. Two separate attacks in a week, and he had repelled both of them, but not without incident. Two families had been destroyed this week.

"Harry," Remus began, "do you-"

"I wasn't quick enough," cut in Harry, remembering all the painful memories of the past week. *God it had been eventful...*

"You saved a lot of people from being kissed-"

Harry jumped to his feet. "BUT THEY WERE ONLY KIDS, REMUS," he shouted. "THEY BARELY HAD A CHANCE AT LIFE BEFORE-"

Remus Lupin knew how Harry felt, he'd felt this way himself more than once recently. "We are at war, Harry! There are always casualties... always. It was horrible in the first war. People you had known your entire life just being cut down. Your best friends joining *him...*"

"So that's all that family was," Harry spat back, lashing out at anyone. "A few *casualties of war!*"

"No," said Remus calmly, though he was just as angry as Harry.

Harry sighed and covered his face with his hands. "Why can't I just have some peace for once?"

"Igitur qui desiderat pacem, praeparet bellum," said Remus quietly.

Harry looked up at this, confusion mixed with grief in his emerald eyes. "What does that mean? Was it a spell?"

Remus shook his head. "It's Latin, Harry. It means, 'He who wishes for peace, let him prepare for war.'"

Harry grew quiet, the guilt of it all coming back to him in a fresh wave. "If I was only faster, it's just like when Sirius-"

"NO," shouted Lupin unexpectedly, grabbing Harry by the throat and throwing him back up against the wall. Harry cried out as his leg banged against the wall. "Listen to me very carefully, Harry," he said, looking up into his face. "You - are - not - to - blame - for his death, nor are you responsible for the lives of that family... If you're going to blame anyone, *blame fucking Voldemort.*"

Lupin let him go and Harry slid down to the floor coughing. Harry had never seen Lupin so enraged, it was scary. He could see the wolf behind his eyes. He always seemed so in control, he'd lost it at the mention of Sirius. It was a long moment before anyone spoke but then Tom, who had previously gone unnoticed, standing in the doorway, said something.

"Er- I've... I've got your lunch here, lads... I'll just pop it on the table and -er- go."

Once Tom had left, Harry looked up at Remus. "You're pretty strong," he said.

"Yeah... one of the pros of being a werewolf," he said bitterly.

"Oh... Look, Remus I-"

"It's all right, Harry... don't worry."

In the silence that followed, he and Remus came to an understanding that neither had to put into words. After a moment had passed Lupin spoke. "We better eat some of these sandwiches," he said.

Harry and Lupin sat at the table and began to eat, they talked normally, and Lupin made a few jokes about his hair. "By the way, Harry, nice haircut," he laughed.

"Shut up... I like it," said Harry.

"No I really do think its good...." he said in a near serious voice. "Goes well with the earring," he finished laughing.

"Ohh, sod off," joked Harry.

Lupin stopped laughing and his manner turned serious. "You still want to

go into London this afternoon?"

Harry thought for a moment. "Yes..." he finally said. "I do need to buy a suit."

"Okay, we'll go after lunch. But first I have to go owl Dumbledore, tell him what happened. I'll be back in a minute."

Lupin left the room, leaving Harry alone with his thoughts. *I should have been faster* he thought. *I will be... this is the last time. Enough death.*

Harry ate his sandwich in silence. After he had finished, he limped up to his room and put his robes and books in his new trunk. By the time he'd hobbled back downstairs Remus had returned and was waiting by the door that opened up on to London. He had transfigured his robes into a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. Harry thought he looked very irregular.

"Hang on, Harry; before we go out let me transfigure your robes."

Harry stopped at the door as Lupin transfigured his black robes into black jeans and t-shirt.

"That'll do, let's go." Remus opened the door to Muggle London and stepped through, followed by Harry. "Right then," he said. "Where do we go?"

"I- I don't know... I think maybe we should head to the Strand, it's the big shopping area in London."

Harry and Lupin followed the signs to the central business district of London, and soon found what they were looking for, a respectable enough men's tailor. They entered the shop and looked around. It was very posh and very clean, Harry felt out of place in his plain jeans and shirt. A very snobbish looking man approached Harry and looked him up and down before speaking.

"May I help you... *sir*," he said in a tone that clearly stated he didn't think they should have been in his shop.

"Yeah, " said Harry, more than a little annoyed. "I'd like a suit please... something for a funeral."

The man paused before speaking and his eye's flicked over to Lupin.
"Very well... follow me."

"I'll wait over the road in that coffee shop," whispered Lupin, who didn't like the funny looks he was attracting from the people in the shop.

"Okay... I won't be long."

Harry followed the sales assistant into a back room; the walls of this room were lined with plain, black suits. There was no one else in the room apart from a little man with a tape measure.

"Do you see anything you like?"

Harry surveyed the dozens of suits on the wall. He didn't know what to look for, so he just pointed to one suit hanging next to the door.

"Very good, sir...."

The man with the tape measure was now measuring Harry. After five minutes he pulled out a pen and paper and started making notes. This went on for another ten minutes.

"I think we should try a fourteen, Frank," said the tailor.

The snobbish man called Frank nodded and disappeared into a row of suits looking for the correct size. He emerged triumphant two minutes later carrying the right one. He handed it to Harry, who started to put it on but ran into some trouble when he removed his jeans and tried to pull the pants past his sore leg. This was the first time Harry had actually had a good look at his wounded leg, and it wasn't pretty. There was a big, deep purple bruise running the length of his shin right up to the knee. A rough scar also followed this path up his shin. The tailor had noticed this too.

"Jeez... that's a nasty looking thing. What happened to your leg?" he asked.

"It's a... er... football injury," lied Harry.

The tailor seemed to accept this and returned to his work. A few minutes later Harry was looking at himself in the mirror. It looked good. He didn't have very broad shoulders, he never had, but they filled the suit well, it

was the right length at the cuffs and not too tight around the middle.

"Would you like this one, sir?" asked Frank.

"Please," said Harry.

Harry changed back into his jeans and shirt, while Frank wrapped his suit. He came back through to the counter as Frank pressed some buttons on the cash register.

"That will be one hundred and fifty pounds, sir."

Harry unrolled his roll of Muggle money and handed over the bills. He picked up his suit bag and left. Remus was sitting across the road reading the afternoon edition of the Prophet. Harry sat down at the table and ordered a cup of tea.

"Everything go alright, Harry?" Remus asked as he sat down.

"Oh yeah... fine."

Lupin sighed. "Hmm... they got this out quick."

Remus handed Harry the copy of the Prophet he had been reading. "One of the people you saved was a reporter," he said. Harry began to read.

DEMENTOR'S ATTACK DIAGON ALLEY

You-Know-Who makes first move in war
Ian Lighterman

Earlier today Dementors appeared in Diagon Alley, presumably on You-Know-Who's orders, and attacked shoppers who happened to be in the Alley at the time, myself among them. The street grew dark as they arrived, and several people fell to the floor as their power took hold. There were at least thirty Dementors that swooped down upon those trapped. Hoods were lowered to many people, but just when hope had fled, a ray of light shone through the darkness.

Harry Potter, 'The Boy Who Lived', had cast his Patronus charm to drive the Dementors away. The Patronus charm is a piece of highly advanced magic that many wizards have trouble conjuring; it is the only known way to drive off a Dementor. Potter's Patronus took the shape of a stag and charged down the Dementors. Sadly the dark creatures did claim four victims. The Robertson family, well known for their contributions to St. Mungo's, was cornered against Flourish and Blotts and lost their souls.

But Mr. Potter has again proven his courage in the face of danger. Dozens of witches and wizards owe their lives to him today and would like to see he receives proper recognition for his heroism.

The article was complete with a picture of Harry taken that day in Diagon Alley after the attack. It showed Harry talking to Kingsley, with Remus next to him. He put the paper aside.

"They've made me out to be a hero...." he sighed.

"You did do a very heroic thing," argued Lupin.

"I was just there at the right time...."

"Fifty people would have lost their souls had it not been for you. You are a powerful wizard, and you do seem to have a knack for fighting the Dark Arts."

Harry nodded. "I suppose I do...."

"Of course you do, now, are we done shopping for the day?"

"Actually I want to buy some normal clothes. You know like shirts, shorts, jumpers, and jeans."

Remus drained his cup and nodded. "Okay, let's go."

Two hours later Harry made his way up the stairs to his room at the Leaky Cauldron. He had purchased a lot of new clothes, mostly black things to go with his robes. After placing all the clothes in his trunk, he

went back downstairs to join Remus for dinner.

They were once again in the private back room for dinner. When Harry entered he saw that Remus was in deep discussion with Tom, but they broke away once they saw him.

"Harry," said Remus, a little surprised as he shoved a piece of parchment into his pocket. "Didn't hear you come in."

Harry looked from Remus to Tom, whatever they were talking about, he wasn't meant to hear.

"What's for dinner?" Harry asked, ending the awkward silence and pretending he hadn't seen anything.

"Steak and mash all right?" asked Tom.

"That'll be fine, Tom," Remus replied, throwing two logs onto the fire.

Tom left the room to go and fetch their dinner. Harry and Lupin went and sat at the table next to the fire.

"Steak *is* okay, isn't it?" Remus asked him.

Harry was staring into the flames and turned to look at Remus. "Oh yeah, it's fine."

"Good."

"Listen, Remus, I've been meaning to ask you all day... what are the other members of the Order up to?" Harry whispered anxiously. "What's happening?"

Remus frowned in thought. "Well...." he said, it appeared he was choosing his words carefully. "I'm not sure actually. Mundungus is watching Death Eaters, but I don't know where Tonks and Moody are. Dumbledore sent them away on a mission while you were in hospital."

"Do you think they're okay?"

"Oh I'm sure they're fine... Dumbledore would've heard if something had happened."

After dinner, Lupin and Harry spent the rest of the evening playing chess. When Harry finally surrendered to Remus' suicidal knights, it was well past eleven. He said goodnight to Lupin and left the room just as Tom came in.

Harry knew he should have gone up to bed, he knew he shouldn't have listened, but he did. The door was ajar and leaning close, he could hear what was said.

"You really think he'll try to recruit him," said Tom, with an edge of fear in his voice.

"It's looking more and more likely...." sighed Lupin. "Especially after what he did in Diagon Alley today. He keeps proving himself as a really powerful wizard."

"Do you think Harry... will-"

"No, Tom, I don't think Harry would ever join Voldemort," Remus replied truthfully. "He isn't that stupid."

That was enough for Harry. He turned and limped through the hall and up the stairs to his room. Blowing out the lamps, he lay down in bed with only his thoughts for company. *So Voldemort wants me now*, he thought. *A week ago he nearly killed me.... I'll never join him...*

Harry quickly fell asleep with these dark thoughts clouding his mind.

"Crucio," cried Harry.

A figure of a woman on the floor in front of him screamed in pain. The woman was Bellatrix Lestrage. Harry stopped the spell and spoke to Bellatrix in a voice that wasn't quite his own.

"You have learned your lesson I think," said Voldemort/Harry.

"Yes.... yes, master," moaned Bellatrix.

"That is twice you have failed me this week. You will not fail me again, will you?"

"No my Lord.... no."

"Good, now tell me what went wrong in Diagon Alley."

Bellatrix handed Voldemort/Harry a copy of the Prophet, with the article about the attack on the front, he read it.

Voldemort/Harry turned away from Bellatrix and walked over to a table in the corner of the room. Sitting on a perch next to the table was a large, black eagle with dark eyes and a blood red beak. Voldemort/Harry picked up a quill and began to write on a piece of parchment.

Harry awoke with a start, hundreds of miles away; it was in the early hours of the morning. He sat up in bed and pressed his hand to his scar, which was still burning, though not bad enough for it to bleed. He tried to remember the dream but the pictures were slowly slipping away. He could remember a woman being tortured.... Bellatrix, and he could remember a black eagle and Voldemort writing a letter.... but to whom.

Harry leaned back down in bed and continued to think, but it wasn't long before he drifted off to sleep again.

That morning he woke early. The first rays of sunlight were streaming through his window and all was quiet. He checked his watch, it was seven thirty, the funeral was in two and a half hours. Harry collected his suit and cane and got into the shower. Twenty minutes later he emerged clean shaven and wearing his suit. As he tried to straighten a few creases in his suit using the mirror, there was a knock on the door.

"Coming to breakfast, Harry?" called Remus.

"I'll be right there, Remus," he replied, his stomach doing flips from the anxiety.

Harry listened as he heard Lupin's footsteps fade away. Now that the funeral was so close, the enormous feeling of guilt had started to form in the pit of his stomach, he didn't think he could eat anything. Five minutes later he had descended the stairs and was limping down the hall to the back room. His stomach was in knots when he entered the room. Lupin was sitting at the table reading the Daily Prophet and smiling.

"Harry," he said. "Guess what?"

Not really in the mood to guess, Harry shrugged. "I give up..."

"It says here that you're tipped to receive the Order of Merlin, Second Class, for what you did yesterday in Diagon Alley."

Harry didn't quite know what to make of this. He didn't really care. "Oh... that's... that's good."

"Is everything okay, Harry?" asked Remus.

"Yeah, I'm fine," lied Harry. "Er- what time we leaving?"

Remus stared at him for a moment. "I'm sorry, Harry but I'm not coming. I've been called away on work for the Order. Apparently Voldemort is up to something around Stonehenge, maybe. I'll take your trunk to Hogwarts and then I have to go away for awhile."

"How am I going to get to Little Whinging and back?"

"Floo, you're going to take floo powder to Arabella Figg's old house, its empty. And from there you can go to the church on Rawlinson Street, that's where the service is. And then back to Arabella's house and floo to Hogwarts. The fireplace in Gryffindor common room has been configured to allow you, and only you, access."

"Oh... where are you going?"

"Can't tell you that, Harry... Dumbledore's orders."

Harry gritted his teeth. It was his job to kill Voldemort, you think someone would tell him something. "Hmm... I had a dream about Voldemort last night," he said.

Lupin looked up, the paper forgotten. "What happened?"

"Not much really, I saw him torturing Bellatrix Lestrange and then he learned about how I stopped the Dementors, and then he began to write a letter to someone but I didn't see who, and then I woke up."

"Was there a big, black eagle...?" Lupin asked quietly, apprehensively.

"Yeah... yeah there was."

Lupin sighed. "Hmm... that's the bird he uses to send recruitment letters to people."

Harry's eyes widened. "Recrui- for the Death Eater's?"

"Yeah... we know he's sent at least two hundred and seventy-five since last February. There's probably more we don't know about."

"How many Death Eater's does he have?" asked Harry.

"Only he knows the exact number, but we think it's somewhere in the region of two hundred."

"Two hundred!"

"Yeah..."

"Why would so many join him?"

"He doesn't just send you a letter and let you decide. If you refuse... he'll come after you, and your family. So you either join him or die... people have been disappearing for a few months now."

"Can't the Ministry do anything?"

"People are too scared to come forward... it's starting to get like it was sixteen years ago."

For the next couple of hours Harry didn't say much. He was, as he had been doing all week, reflecting on the past. Sirius was most prominent in his mind, as was the dream where he had spoken to him. He wasn't sure if it was real, could it have just been a dream. A coincidence maybe... or was it something deeper. The feeling of guilt had increased as Lupin handed him a pouch of floo powder a few minutes later.

"Now, I don't know when I'll see you again, so this is goodbye for awhile. Enjoy this year... I know it got off to a bit of a rough start... but do try and stay out of trouble."

"Okay, Remus I'll... I'll see you around," said Harry, as he stepped into the fireplace. "What do I say?"

Lupin smiled sadly. "Just say 'Little Whinging'. There will be a few

members of the Order nearby in Little Whinging for protection, but they'll stay under invisibility cloaks. Just stay safe."

Harry nodded, he'd leave them be. "Bye, Remus," he whispered, throwing down some floo powder. "Little Whinging."

The world blurred and in no time at all he was in Mrs. Figg's living room. His eyes immediately flicked to where he knew her body had been. He shook his head, and in so doing, noticed all the soot on his suit. He pulled out his wand and performed a cleaning spell, not caring much about the Statute of Secrecy right now. He glanced one last time at the chair and then exited the house, hearing the ruffle of an invisibility cloak as he went.

Outside on the street Harry looked around. It seemed that years had passed since he had fallen from his broomstick and broken his arm on this very street, in reality it was less than a week. He didn't hang around though. It was nine forty-five and he had fifteen minutes to get to the church.

The church was five streets over and as Harry walked, he began to feel more and more nervous. The journey to the church was over much sooner than he had expected, and he found himself standing at the gates, watching people make their way into the building. Harry recognised some of the people. There was Aunt Marge, whom he had blown up three summers ago, Dudley's gang was present, and there were several people he'd met over the years from his Uncle's side of the family and drill company.

Harry remained standing there as everybody went inside and the doors were closed. No one noticed him. He couldn't bring himself to go inside, though, not with the guilt he was feeling. He stood there for an hour as the service went on. After what seemed like five minutes to him, the doors opened and out walked the procession, followed by three coffins on the shoulders of eighteen pallbearers, six to a coffin. Harry wiped away a few desperate tears, cursing Voldemort and his fate.

He followed the coffins down the empty street to the cemetery, and again watched from afar as they were placed in the graves and the Reverend gave the final words. *Ashes to Ashes, Dust to Dust*. Once the

service was over, the crowd started to break up and leave. It had ended just like that. Some of the procession lingered to pay their last respects, but the coffins had been confined to the shallow earth. A few cried as they placed the first dirt and a rose into each grave, and Harry let fall a silent tear.

Time seemed to speed up for Harry and when he next looked at the graves, the grave diggers had begun to fill in the three holes and fifteen minutes later they too left, their work done.

Harry limped over to the three tombstones and looked down in silence; it was a long time before he said anything. Standing guiltily over the three separate brown rectangles of fresh dirt. He sighed with remorse and regret.

"I'm sorry...." he whispered. "This is my fault... all my fault." Tears began to roll down his cheeks. "He killed you because I was there... I'm sorry...." Harry fell to his knees before the graves. "I won't let him get away with it... he will pay... I promise you that."

Harry pulled out his wand and muttered a small spell. Flowers shot out of the end and he pulled them off, laying them before the graves.

"I'm sorry...." he whispered finally, before turning away.

The walk to Mrs. Figg's seemed to take hours. Finally, Harry arrived and entered through the door. He wanted nothing more than to get out of here. Away from the grief. He walked towards and into the fireplace.

"Hogwarts, Gryffindor Common Room," he said, throwing some floo powder to the ground.

The world blurred and he lost site of Mrs. Figg's living room, as the deafening sound of the floo pounded in his ears Harry didn't know it then, but that was the last time he ever set foot in Little Whinging, Surrey.

Chapter 4 - Of Krups and Animagus

Live in the now, with whoever you can

Never let the future disturb you

You will meet it, if you have to, with

The same weapons of reason which

Today arm you against the present

-- Marcus Aurelius

It being lunch time on a Sunday, the common room was deserted. Harry limped up the stairs to his dorm room, barely taking in the new 'Sixth Year' plaque on the wooden door before going in. The room was much the same as ever, the same five four poster beds lined the walls and, to Harry's relief, his trunk was at the bottom of his bed.

Harry lay down on the bed, resting his leg, he'd been on it too long and it had started to throb. He lay there thinking, thinking about the prophecy, about how it would be him and Voldemort at the end. Everything was just too much. He was a teenager. He was still in school for god's sake and yet he'd faced more danger and evil than most people and he knew more was coming... Harry's thoughts strayed towards his parents and how any chance of a normal life had died when they did. It seemed to him he couldn't think of a single happy thought right now.

About ten minutes later he decided he'd go get something to eat. Pulling on some robes, he made his way down to the Great Hall. The corridors were empty on the way down, and in no time at all, he was standing in front of the doors to the Hall. Harry listened, from the sound of it the whole school was in there. He braced himself and opened the door.

As if on que, the entire school turned their heads to look at him. There was a moment of silence and then the whispers broke out.

"It's Harry Potter."

"Look at his hair."

"He looks so different and that earring."

"Thirty dementors, saved fifty people."

"Why's he using a cane?"

"Do you think he hurt his leg falling through the window?"

"I'm hungry, pass the fruit."

The walk to Ron and Hermione, halfway down the Gryffindor table, seemed to take forever. Harry walked with a thousand pairs of eyes on him. Finally he reached his friends, and sat next to Ron.

"All right, mate?" asked Ron gently.

"Yeah... I'm fine."

"How was... how was the funeral?"

"Oh... okay...." Harry didn't want to talk about it.

"By the way, did you do something to you hair?" asked Ron casually, his voice laced with sarcasm.

"Sod off! You can't think of any new jokes. I've heard them all from Remus," laughed Harry, pulling a plate of sausages towards him. "And how are you Hermione?"

"Oh I'm fine, but it seems we can't leave *you* alone for five minutes without you being attacked by some dark creature."

"You heard about the dementors then."

"Everyone heard about them, Harry, it was all over the papers."

"You did a good job though," said Ron.

"No I didn't... there was a family that...."

"You still saved a lot of lives," said Hermione.

"Yeah... Hey listen, has anyone asked about DA meetings?"

"Yes, almost everyone from last year has asked me if it's still on, except those who've left of course. They've all still got the fake galleons, so you just put the time and place on yours and we're all set."

"Good... tonight then."

"Tonight!" said Hermione, a little surprised. "Don't you want to rest? I mean you've done a lot this weekend-"

"No Hermione, tonight... we do it tonight. I want-"

Hermione didn't get to hear what Harry said, because at that moment a large, black eagle, with a blood red beak, flew into the Great Hall with an ear piercing screech. Every head in the room looked upwards as the eagle soared around the hall. Harry watched as it circled the tables, its eyes bouncing to and fro. He looked up at the staff table; Dumbledore had stood up and was watching the bird with a grave look on his face. Several other professors were also standing.

The bird continued its flight around the hall, until its eyes connected with Harry's and it began its descent. The hall was silent as the eagle landed on Harry's shoulder and dropped a black envelope. With another screech the bird took flight, digging its talons painfully into Harry's shoulder as it went.

Most people in the hall had returned to their plates, thinking it no more than a normal delivery bird. Harry on the other hand knew what this bird meant and so did Dumbledore. Up at the staff table he was still standing, he raised his hands for silence, and the hall grew quiet.

"Harry," he began, looking directly at Harry, "I think it best if you accompany me to my office."

Harry nodded and stood up, pocketing the letter and grabbing his cane; he muttered a quick goodbye to Ron and Hermione and limped painfully out of the hall, again with a thousand pairs of eyes on him.

Harry waited in the entrance hall for Dumbledore. After a few minutes curiosity got the better of him and he removed the letter from his pocket.

The envelope was pure black and sealed with a crest in green wax. His name was on the front written in letters of fire. They seemed to burn into the paper. Harry broke the seal with his finger and removed the parchment from within. His stomach doing flips the whole time.

Dear Harry,

First of all, I give you my congratulations. Thwarting that Dementor attack of mine was both irksome and impressive, well done. And second Harry, I don't know if you know this, but I count you as one of the only worthy opponent's I have ever had. No one but Dumbledore has survived me for as long as you have, again my congratulations. I know this may seem uncharacteristic of me, giving you, of all people congratulations. But I write to you today with an offer.

Do you remember, back in your first year, we met for the first time in a decade in front of the Mirror of Erised. I asked you to join me then Harry, you foolishly refused. I ask you again now. Join my Death Eater's. You have proven yourself a wizard of extraordinary power. You and I together, Harry, we will rule this world.

I am afraid, that I don't give people a choice in this matter. Join me or watch those you hold dear die, one by one. I make good on my threats, Potter.

One week, Harry, I give you one week to reply.

Sincerely,

Lord Voldemort

Harry read and re-read the letter several times before the doors to the hall opened and out walked Dumbledore.

"Let's talk in my office, Harry," was all he said.

Harry nodded and followed Dumbledore up the stairs. They walked in silence through the corridors, Dumbledore pausing only once to allow Harry to catch up. Several flights of stairs later they were standing outside of the stone gargoyle that opened on to Dumbledore's office.

"Canary Cream."

The stone gargoyle sprang to life at the mention of Fred and George's most popular product. Harry and Dumbledore ascended the stairs and through the old door into his office. It was the same as ever, the walls were still hung with portraits of the previous headmasters, the tables were still lined with strange instruments and Fawkes, the golden and red phoenix, sat on his perch next to the desk.

"Please sit down, Harry."

Dumbledore was now sitting at his desk gesturing to Harry to take the seat opposite. Harry did.

"I believe you knew what was in that letter before you opened it?"

"Yeah... yeah I did."

"May I read it?"

Harry passed the letter to Dumbledore. While he was reading Harry had another look around the office. His eyes fell on the sword of Gryffindor in the glass case near the stairs. He seemed to be drawn to it, it was the same feeling he had when looking at his griffin earring.

Once he had finished, Dumbledore looked closely at Harry, who returned his gaze. "Well, Harry, it appears we have a problem." Harry said nothing. "This letter holds two problems actually."

"Two?"

"Yes, Harry, one of them is clear. Voldemort wants you to join him, I've feared this for some time."

"But, Professor... you know I would never join-"

"Of course I know that, Harry, which brings me to our second problem. His threat should you deny his offer."

Harry sighed, he'd realised what Dumbledore was getting at. If he didn't join Voldemort, Voldemort would kill the people he held most dear. Who would that be? Ron? Hermione?

"What can I do?"

"I believe that he will come after Ron and Hermione... I'm afraid that all we can do is trust in the safety of the wards at Hogwarts, and you will have to trust in me, Harry. He will not get to them here, I promise you that."

Harry didn't say anything; he was thinking about the trust he had put in Dumbledore to protect him at Privet Drive, and look what hell that turned in to. Could they really be safe here? Harry decided that Hogwarts was the safest place for them; they couldn't be safer anywhere else. But that still didn't mean his trust in Dumbledore was restored, if it ever would be. He had some questions that needed answering.

"Professor," began Harry quietly, "I've just come from the funeral of the last remaining family I had in the world. I've nearly died on three separate occasions in the last week. And I've broken more bones than I count. Now I want to know what I lived for." Harry raised his voice a little as he spoke these next words. "I'm sorry, sir, but my trust in you isn't what you think it is. You promised me safety at Privet Drive, and what I got was a massacre. Voldemort has ruined my life annually over the six past years and has always managed to sneak his way into Hogwarts some way or another. Whether it be on the back of a teachers head, or as a memory in a diary, he's always gotten in. I need some reassurances that Ron and Hermione will be safe here-" Harry faltered, he'd just realised he'd been shouting. He looked back at Dumbledore.

Dumbledore was silent for a moment. He removed his half moon spectacles and rubbed his eyes before replacing them. "Harry," began Dumbledore quietly, "I am truly sorry about Privet Drive. He beat me there and I still don't know how? You ask me to tell you what you lived for? I think I know the answer, as do you. Love for your friends." Dumbledore looked at Harry carefully before saying his next words, as if he were weighing him up. "There is one way that there safety can be guaranteed within these walls." Harry looked up at this. "The Fidelius Charm."

Harry let these words sink in. The Fidelius charm, the secret-keeper charm. This was the spell used to hide his parents, it failed because of

Pettigrew. "I'll do it," said Harry.

Dumbledore nodded. "You must understand, Harry. They will only be guaranteed safety whilst at Hogwarts. If they take one step outside the gates then Voldemort can find them."

"But whenever they're at Hogwarts he can't get to them?" Dumbledore nodded. "Then what are we waiting for?"

Dumbledore rose from his chair and removed his wand from within his robes, and motioned Harry to do the same. "Now, Harry. I want you to think of your friends clearly. Imagine them being safe at Hogwart's, that they are hidden here." Harry did, he saw his friends faces clearly within the walls of the castle. "On three, Harry, Fidelius. One, two, three!"

In unison, Harry and Dumbledore shouted, "FIDELIUS!" An enormous burst of white light issued from the end of both their wands. It met in the middle and started swirling around and around, forming a sphere of this white light. Within it Harry could see images of his friends, safe inside the walls of Hogwarts. It continued to swirl until it was about the size of a Bludger, and then it stopped. It hovered in the air for a moment, before slowly moving towards Harry. It came into contact with Harry's chest and for a brief moment he felt, that without a doubt, he was entirely and completely safe, that nothing in the world could hurt him, but in another moment it was gone, as was the orb of light.

"Where?"

"It is in you, Harry. As long as you keep this secret, he can never touch them here. That I do promise you."

Harry nodded. He wouldn't betray his friends like Pettigrew had done his. He'd die before that happened. As Harry thought about this, his gaze had drifted back to the sword of Gryffindor. Dumbledore noticed this. "You feel drawn to that sword, don't you, Harry."

Without turning his gaze from the sword, Harry spoke, "Yeah... it's like when I saw this earring," he said, tapping the griffin. "I just find it hard to look away... or... not quite that... more like I've seen it somewhere before but can't for the life of me remember where."

Dumbledore surveyed Harry very closely before speaking. "I think that we may need to perform a test."

"A- a test?" said Harry, a little confused.

"Tell me, Harry. Have you ever performed any wandless magic?"

Harry thought hard before answering. "Well... yes, just little things though, like making glass disappear."

"Hmm... could you please stand in front of Godric's sword."

Harry got up and limped a few paces over to the sword case. "Stand about three metres away."

"Professor, what are-"

"You'll see, you'll see... now, which arm is your wand arm?"

"Right...."

"Okay, raise your left arm in front of the case, that's good; now call the sword to you."

"Call- to me? What do you mean?"

"Just that, call it to you, command it to come. Think it, will it to come."

Harry didn't understand what was going on, but he did it anyway. He bent all his thought towards the sword, trying to get it to appear in his outstretched hand. He didn't know how much time had passed, but eventually he thought he saw the sword start to shimmer. After a few more minutes had passed Harry definitely saw the sword move. It had started to shake and the blade was glowing red and then a deep gold. There was a loud sound like a gun firing and the glass of the case exploded outwards in a haze of smoke.

This shocked Harry and he lost his concentration. Up until now he hadn't noticed how heavily he was panting, there was sweat on his brow and his legs felt very weak. He turned to Dumbledore.

"What... just... happened?" he panted.

"You have just confirmed something for me," he said, with a smile on his face. "Look back at the case."

Now that the smoke had cleared Harry could see that something was different. The sword, Godric Gryffindors sword, was gone. It was just gone, no longer there. It wasn't on the floor, behind the case or around it. It had vanished.

"Where..."

"Call for it again, Harry?"

"But it's not there? It's-"

"Your left arm, does it feel different?"

Harry looked at his arm, no noticeable difference. He shook it up and down, now it did feel different, heavier maybe... but stronger. He looked down at it, the arm still looked the same but there was definitely something different.

"Call for it, Harry."

And Harry did. He called for the sword like he did before, except this time he knew it would come. A feeling surged through him, a feeling of power. He felt his left hand close around cold metal and there in his hand was the sword of Gryffindor.

"What- how?"

"Put it away now. Think you can do it, and you will," said Dumbledore.

Harry thought of the sword disappearing and, to his astonishment, it did. In the blink of an eye it was gone, but he could still feel the weight of it in his left arm.

"How? I.... huh?" mumbled Harry amazed.

"Do you remember when you first used the sword, Harry? It appeared in the hat, when you were in need of such a thing. I wasn't sure then, but I am now. You didn't know it but you were subconsciously calling for it."

Harry thought about this, some things didn't make sense. "But how

would I know to call for the blade in the first place. I mean, I had never even heard of it... had I?"

Dumbledore's blue eyes twinkled and he smiled as he said these next few words. "If Godric Gryffindor was famous for one thing besides co-founding Hogwarts, it was his ability to perform many complex spells without the use of a wand. Using this ability, he bound his sword to him and then to anyone in his direct bloodline."

Harry said nothing; it was all falling into place, starting to make sense. "But then... that means-"

"Yes, Harry, you are a direct descendent of Godric Gryffindor. You are in his bloodline. You are the heir of Gryffindor."

"Wow," was all that Harry managed to say. This was big; he was related to Gryffindor and now had a sword attached to him.

"The sword is yours now; it will always be there out of sight... just call for it at times of need. I trust I don't need to tell you about the safety rules at Hogwarts?" There was a small glint in Dumbledore's eyes as he said this. How many times had Harry disregarded his own safety within these walls?

Harry nodded. The sword was now part of him, and he was part of it. They were bound together forever. "I understand. Is that all, Professor?"

"Yes, Harry, you can go back to Gryffindor tower. Don't worry about the letter; you and your friends are safe at Hogwarts. I'll make sure that some extra protection is added, but it shouldn't be necessary with the Fidelius charm."

Harry nodded and looked back down at his arm, he realised he was just standing in the middle of the room doing nothing. He looked up and saw Dumbledore smiling at him. He said goodbye and left Dumbledore's office. He had a lot to take in. So much had happened over the last week that this actually came as little surprise. In no time at all he found himself outside the portrait of the Fat Lady. Harry stared at her for a moment, he didn't know the password.

"Em... I don't suppose you could just open up could you?" he asked.

She stared at him for a moment and then, to Harry's surprise, the portrait swung open. It had been pushed open from the inside by the new Gryffindor first years.

"Hello," said Harry, when they spotted him. "You must be the new students."

They looked too scared to say anything; this was the bloke who'd a week ago come crashing down from the sky all bloody and torn. They mumbled a few words then took off at great speed, casting awe filled glances over their shoulders at Harry.

Harry sighed and turned back to the portrait and slipped quickly through. The common room was mostly empty; the day had turned out quite warm and most people were out on the grounds in the sun. Ron and Hermione were there though, sitting in their favourite armchairs by the fireplace.

"Harry," called Hermione, "over here."

Harry limped over to the armchairs and sat down. He'd hardly had five minutes all day in which to sit down and his leg was most grateful.

"What happened Harry?" asked Ron as soon as Harry was down.

Harry thought before answering, how was he going to tell them that they were now in danger because of him. That being his friend could cost them their lives. After a few moments he spoke. "That letter... that the eagle brought... was from Voldemort."

Ron jumped at the name but Hermione looked concerned. "What did he want?" she asked.

"He...er... wants me to join him... he wants me to be a Death Eater."

The silence that followed was most awkward. Harry couldn't tell what his best friends were thinking, their faces were blank.

"Harry," said Ron. "You did... you did say no?"

"Oh, of course I did you stupid prat," laughed Harry, slapping his best friend up the side of his head. A look of relief washed over Ron's face but

Hermione was staring at Harry intently.

"There's something else though, isn't there?" she said.

Harry sighed. "Yeah... if I... refuse he might... might... come after you two."

The silence that followed this statement was the most awkward yet. Ron and Hermione stared at Harry for a few moments and then started speaking at the same time.

"That doesn't matter, Harry."

"We're your best friends mate, we-"

"We'll be safe at Hogwarts."

"Yeah there's a lot of old magic protecting this place."

Harry sighed. "I know all that... but I've actually been thinking about this for some time, since last year in fact."

"About what?" asked Ron.

"About the price you may pay for being my friends... for being too close to me," said Harry quietly.

"Look, Harry," began Hermione, "we're friends! We have been friends since first year. You can't just push us away now."

"That's right, not after all the shit we've been through together. Sorry, mate, but you're stuck with us."

Harry smiled, it felt good to smile. He didn't have a lot of things to smile about nowadays, this was one of those moments where he just felt glad to have such good friends. "Thanks, you two...."

For some reason he didn't tell them about the other events that had just occurred in Dumbledore's office. His being Gryffindors heir, his new sword-arm, and his assumption that he was probably very gifted at wandless magic. He did tell them about the Fidelius charm, though.

"You'll be safe as long as you're at Hogwarts, by the way. He can't touch

you here, I've seen to that." Ron and Hermione exchanged confused glances and asked Harry to go on. "I'm your secret-keeper. Dumbledore and I used the Fidelius charm to hide you here."

There was a moment of silence and then Hermione spoke. "Harry... thank you."

"Yeah, cheers, mate."

"It's okay. You're only safe at Hogwarts, though. You leave the grounds the charm doesn't work."

"It's all right, Harry," said Hermione. "Now, do you still want to have a DA meeting tonight?"

"Yeah... I think it best if we get down to some serious defence this year... and maybe some powerful curses and hexes."

Ron and Hermione exchanged a quick worried glance. There was a fire in Harry's eyes that they had never seen before and a look of grave determination on his face.

"Harry-"

"What?" he asked, his face returning to normal.

"Em... you're going to have to set the time and date on the galleon...." said Hermione.

"Oh right, I'll ju- Damn! I don't have it anymore, it was at Privet Drive."

"I thought that might have happened. Here use mine." Hermione pulled a gold coin out of her robes and handed it to Harry. "As long as it's *you* who sets the time, then any of the galleons will work."

Harry nodded and pulled out his wand. "Let's see... how about seven o'clock." He set the time and handed the coin back to Hermione. "Right, what can we do for the next five hours then?"

"We could do some homework," said Hermione eagerly. "Harry, you missed a really good spell in charms last week, come on I'll teach it to you. Ron you could probably do with some practice as well."

For the next few hours the three of them practiced the Gravatius Charm. A spell that allows the user to float several metres off the ground. Though Ron thought the spell did more harm than good, when he cast a particularly strong one and went flying up into the air and hit his head on the ceiling.

"That's good, Harry, now cast the spell on yourself again to come back down," instructed Hermione.

"Gravios," said Harry with his wand pointed at his chest. He floated back down to the ground and into an armchair. "Well that was fun, what else have I missed?"

"Not a lot really, we've just been revising last year's work you know, to get back into the swing of things."

"Oh, how's DADA?"

"That class is brilliant," said Ron. "Dumbledore really knows his stuff."

"When do we have it next?"

"Tomorrow afternoon, it's a double period."

"Sounds good," said Harry. Looking at his watch he realised it was 6:30. "Come on; let's get some dinner and then head to the DA room."

Dumbledore sat patiently by the fire in his office. He was waiting for Alastor Moody, who was expected any minute. As he was waiting, he thought about Harry and how much danger he'd been in last week. His thoughts were interrupted though when a small blaze ignited in the fireplace.

"Alastor," he said a moment later when the ex-Auror's head appeared. "It's good to see you well."

"You too," he growled.

"How's the search coming?"

"A lot better than it was last week. I've tracked him right through to

America. He gave me the slip though when I tried to talk to him at his *apartment*." Moody said this last word as though it barely past for a living space. "Disapparated somewhere."

"He can Apparate!" said Dumbledore.

"That's not all he can do. His place was full of magic books, and some pretty advanced ones at that. I'll tell you... he'd be something in a duel."

Dumbledore sat deep in thought for a moment. "I need you to keep trying Alastor. If Voldemort finds him first, things are going to get a lot more... difficult."

"That's not the only reason you want him, though... is it?"

"No it isn't. Voldemort is trying to recruit Harry, Alastor."

"Jesus...."

"Yes I know..." sighed Dumbledore. At that moment Moody thought Dumbledore had never looked older. "Find him, Alastor; I need to talk to him."

"Don't worry, I'll get him...." And with that he was gone, leaving Dumbledore once again alone with his thoughts.

On the other side of the castle, Harry, Ron and Hermione entered the Room of Requirement. It was how they'd remembered it. Cushions scattered across the floor, books piled high on shelves against the wall, and every type of dark detector imaginable along the back wall.

"What we doing tonight then Harry?" asked Ron.

"Tonight we step away from defence and head into offence. Curses, hexes, and charms."

"Do you think that's wise?" asked Hermione.

"Why wouldn't it be?" countered Harry, turning to face her.

Hermione was shocked by the face she saw looking back at her. It was

no longer the face of the Harry she had known all these years. It was the face of someone who had seen things that no one should have to see, the face of someone who had been through more than his fair share of evil. It was a Harry who had grown up to accept that he had something to do before he could rest. Hermione had suspected it since last year, that Harry was hiding a great burden from them, something Dumbledore had told him after he had returned from the Department of Mysteries.

"Harry...

I...."

"What Hermione? Do you think that Voldemort would spare you if you don't know how to fight back? Hell, he destroyed four people with that dementor attack; two of them were just kids."

Hermione heard the finality in his voice. The issue wasn't open for argument; they were going to do it his way.

Harry turned away and walked over to the defence books and pulled down a thick tome entitled, *Advanced Curses*. Ron, who had been silent during the argument, just shrugged his shoulders at Hermione. He had seen the same look on Harry's face that she had, and it had scared him.

Ten minutes later the first members of the DA started to arrive. Ginny Weasley, Dean Thomas, and Seamus Finnegan entered the room. They started to walk over to Harry but a quick glance at Ron and Hermione told them they should give him some room. Instead they sat near Hermione and shot her quizzical looks. Harry was on his own on the other side of the room, still reading the curse book. Soon other members started to pour in. Zacharias Smith, Neville Longbottom, Katie Bell, Lavender Brown and the Patil twins all arrived within five minutes. Next came Colin and Dennis Creevey, Ernie Macmillan, Justin Finch-Fletchley, Hannah Abbott, Michael Corner, Luna Lovegood, Susan Bones, Anthony Goldstein and Terry Boot.

Once everyone was accounted for Harry stood up and started pacing the room. Every eye was on him. He continued pacing and glancing at the students before him. The only sound that could be heard was the dull thunk, thunk, thunk of Harry's cane on the stone floor. Eventually he stopped moving and turned to face his audience.

"Why are you here?" he asked.

No one said anything. There was a few nervous glances shared between the members, but still no one said anything.

"Why are you here?" Harry asked again.

"So we can learn some defence," said Ron.

Harry looked into the face of his best friend. "Wrong," he said quietly. "Anyone else want to take a stab at it? No? Good. That answer, Ron," he nodded to his best friend, "would have been correct last year, but now most of you know and believe we are at war with the Dark Lord." Harry let these words hang for a moment before continuing. "You are no longer here to learn defence; you are here to learn offence. You are here to learn how to take the fight back to Voldemort. Now I'm not telling you to go out and look for a fight, but if it happens I want you to know how to fight back-

"Lighten' up," interrupted Zacharias Smith.

Harry glared at Zacharias. "Do not interrupt me again, Smith." Harry said these words with such force that Zacharias looked down in shame. "Now where was I? Oh yeah, I want you to know how to fight back. You are here to learn and only to learn." Everyone was shocked by the sudden change that had come over Harry, none more so than his two best friends.

"Harry," said Hermione, "you expect everyone here to learn how to fight You-Know-Who?"

"No, Hermione, I don't. Voldemort is-" Harry faltered, "someone else's problem...."

In that instant Hermione thought she saw a shadow pass over Harry's face. *What are you hiding from us?* she thought.

"I expect you to be able to fight his Death Eater's," finished Harry.

"Let's get to it then," said Ron happily, trying to break the gloom that had settled over the group since Harry's speech.

"Right," agreed Harry. "Now I need a volunteer, Ron?"

"Sure thing, mate." Ron got up and stood opposite Harry.

"Everyone watch this and then partner off and practice." Harry turned to face Ron; they were about three yards apart. "I don't want you to try and stop me Ron, it won't hurt, no need to worry." Harry gave Ron a sly smile and summoned some cushions around him. "Now this charm could give you the advantage you need over an enemy. Ready, Ron?"

"Ready."

Harry pointed his wand at Ron and shouted "*Constrictus amropa*." Ropes shot out of Harry's wand and quickly wrapped themselves around Ron. He fell over backwards and landed softly on the pillows. "Now Ron is completely at my mercy," smiled Harry.

"I could still take you," said Ron levelly.

Harry laughed at his best friend struggling to even sit up. "Sure you could, mate, sure you could." Harry pointed his wand at Ron again. "Finite Incantatum." The bonds holding Ron down disappeared and he picked himself up. Harry turned back to the group. "Now everyone get to work."

For the next hour and a half Harry put the DA through its paces. Everything from the disarming charm to the Patronus was revised. At ten to nine Harry ended the meeting and the students left grumbling, many of them rubbing small wounds they had received over the course of the evening.

Harry, Ron and Hermione were the last to leave, as always they had stayed behind to straighten up the room. As they walked back through the castle to Gryffindor tower in silence, Hermione was working up the courage to ask Harry what he was hiding but she didn't want to get him angry again. Before she knew it though, they were saying goodnight at the foot of the dorm room stairs, having decided to have an early night.

Harry and Ron climbed the stairs and entered their room. They weren't the only ones who had decided to sleep early. Dean, Seamus, and Neville were all asleep and Seamus was snoring heavily. Apparently the

DA meeting took a lot out of them. Harry quickly changed into his pyjamas, muttered a quick goodnight to Ron and fell asleep almost as soon as his head hit the pillow.

It didn't stay that way though. All through the night he kept waking up. His nightmares not allowing him a rest from Voldemort. At one point he woke up screaming, waking Ron in the process.

"HARRY!" shouted Ron. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing... nothing I'm fine, just a bad dream."

"Are you sure-"

"I'm fine, Ron, go back to sleep."

"Okay...." Ron was asleep in minutes, his other roommates hadn't even battered an eyelid, but Harry was awake long after that; looking into those deep, cold red eyes.

Breakfast Monday morning was much the same as it had always been. The tables filled up, the food magically appeared, and people stared half-heartedly at their porridge as they realised it was a good five days before the next weekend.

Harry on the other hand, was in danger of falling face down into his porridge. He had barely slept for four hours last night and he was knackered. After waking Ron up for the third time, he decided that he wasn't going to sleep that night and went down to the common room at 4:30. Two hours later he was the first into the hall for breakfast.

"Morning, Harry," said Ron, as he approached the table and sat opposite his best friend, pulling a plate of sausages towards him in the process.

"Mooorrrnninng...." Harry said, trying unsuccessfully to stifle a yawn.

"You look like you kept waking me up all night," said Ron. "What was the matter?"

"Nothing... jus- just had a bad dream."

"Was it *him*?" whispered Ron.

"Yeah. Just another average 'Voldemort ruins my entire life' dream," Harry said bitterly.

Ron watched as his best friends eyes seemed to blaze with anger at the mention of the Dark Lord. "You- you wanna talk about it?"

"No... No, lets just have some breakfast."

Harry and Ron ate in silence for the next ten minutes, Ron casting worried looks towards Harry out of the corner of his eye, until Hermione emerged through the doors and swept her way up through the Hall towards her friends. "How are we this morning?" she asked them briskly, sitting herself next to Harry.

Harry remained silent, still staring into his porridge, so Ron answered. "We're good. Harry's a little tired though...." Ron looked into Hermione's eyes and quickly flicked his own towards Harry. She got the message and didn't ask what was wrong.

"By the way, Harry, I have your timetable here," said Hermione, removing the card from her robes and then passing it to Harry. "Transfiguration first up," she said happily.

Harry skimmed through his timetable.

Monday (Morning):

Double Transfiguration, Professor McGonagall, Transfiguration room

Care of Magical Creatures, Professor Hagrid, the Grounds

Monday (Afternoon):

Double Defence Against the Dark Arts, Professor Dumbledore, DADA room 2 Divination, Professor Trelawney, The North Tower.

Tuesday (Morning):

Double Potions, Professor Snape, Potions Dungeon Care of Magical Creatures, Professor Hagrid, the Grounds

Tuesday (Afternoon):

Double Charms, Professor Flitwick, Charms room 2.

Divination, Professor Firenze, Ground floor Room 11

Wednesday (Morning):

*Double Care of Magical Creatures, Professor Hagrid, the Grounds
Charms, Professor Flitwick, Charms room 2.*

Wednesday (Afternoon):

Double Potions, Professor Snape, Potions Dungeon.

Divination, Professor Trelawney, The North Tower.

Thursday (Morning):

Double Defence Against the Dark Arts, Professor Dumbledore, DADA room 2.

Charms, Professor Flitwick, Charms room 2.

Thursday (Afternoon):

Double Defence Against the Dark Arts, Professor Dumbledore, DADA room 2.

Divination, Professor Firenze, Ground floor Room 11.

Friday (Morning):

*Double Transfiguration, Professor McGonagall, Transfiguration room.
Care of Magical Creatures, Professor Hagrid, the Grounds*

Friday (Afternoon):

Double Charms, Professor Flitwick, Charms room 2.

Divination, Professor Trelawney, the North Tower.

"We have DADA most of the day on Thursday?"

"Yes, and we also have it with all the houses combined into one class of

about sixty-five. It's the same with Charms as well."

"Why?" asked Harry.

"Depends on how many people chose a particular course for NEWT studies. Smaller amount of people doing DADA, so they merged it into one class with people from every house."

"Oh. Is Malfoy still in these classes?"

Hermione sighed and Ron mumbled something under his breath that made Hermione 'tsk'. "Sadly yes," she said. "He's in Charms and Defence Against the Dark Arts."

"Still his usual unbearable self?"

"Actually he's been rather subdued with his insults of late. He keeps smirking at us though, like he knows something we don't."

"Stuff him; I really can't be bothered with that git anymore."

"Good for you, Harry."

As the three of them started to finish up their breakfast and started to leave, they heard a familiar swoosh as the post owls descended on the Great Hall. Huge tawny owls, small brown owls and pathetic little golf ball size owls sought out their recipients. Harry, Ron and Hermione were at the door when a large owl, possibly the most impressive looking owl any of them had ever seen, landed on Harry's shoulder. "Hello," he said, "can I help you?"

The huge owl stook out one of its legs and Harry removed the envelope attached. The bird uttered a small *hoot* and then took off, back out into the sky. Harry watched it go and then shoved the letter into his pocket, whatever it was it could wait; they needed to get to Transfiguration. The going was slow as Harry had trouble keeping up with his cane. He had started to develop an intense dislike for the cane. The three of them arrived at Transfiguration just as the bell went. Harry took a seat up the back next to Ron, who was next to Hermione; he wanted to be able to open his letter out of the way of McGonagall.

"Good morning everyone," began Professor McGonagall. "I trust we all had a good weekend?" Not waiting for an answer she continued. "Now that we're all back into the swing of things, it's time we started getting through the NEWT course. This term we will be studying the Animagus transformation more closely, and seeing if any of you possess the ability for this transfiguration."

Harry looked up at this. He had been thinking about becoming an animagus for some time now, practically since third year when he had discovered that his father had been one. He pocketed his still unopened, very official looking letter, and started paying attention.

"Now I don't expect all of you to be able to become animagi, in fact I'd be surprised if any of you could. But in light of recent events," her eyes flicked towards Harry's. "Professor Dumbledore and I have agreed that it will probably be best if you find out whether or not you are suited to this branch of Transfiguration sooner, rather than later."

Whispers broke out between the assembled Ravenclaws and Gryffindors. Animagi, they were going to see if they could become an Animagus. Harry remained silent after her statement; he had just come to a decision in his head, and would approach Professor McGonagall after class.

"Quiet down, quiet down," said Professor McGonagall. "Now open your textbooks to page 465 and start taking notes on the finer points of Animagus transformation."

As the class began reading, Harry placed his textbook up on the desk, to avoid anyone seeing what he was doing, and removed the letter from his pocket. It was possibly the finest parchment he had ever seen. It was silky to the touch and appeared to radiate a small glow. There was an emblem in the top right corner of the envelope, where the stamp would usually go on a Muggle letter, it was a picture of the British Isles with two wands crossed over the top, and beneath the logo were the words: *From the Office of the Minister of Magic*. 'What does Fudge want with me?' thought Harry. He opened the envelope to find the same quality parchment as from the envelope.

Dear Mr Potter,

Please allow me to be the first to congratulate you on receiving the Order of Merlin, Second Class, for your act of bravery and heroism last Saturday at Diagon Alley. You are one of its youngest recipients. This is one of the greatest honours that the wizarding community can bestow, once again my congratulations.

Also Harry, I would like to offer my apology for myself and the Ministry's behaviour over certain events that have occurred over the last two years. We were wrong, you were right, we apologise. This war will need people like you, Harry, and we hope you'll fight for us once you finish school.

The award ceremony for your Order of Merlin will be in two months time at the Ministry of Magic Formal Events Hall. You will be notified with all the details closer to the date.

Hope you are well,

Cornelius Fudge

Minister of Magic

Harry scoffed. *Fudge was apologising*, he thought, *He didn't seem so apologetic last year at the hearing. He's not going to smooth thing over that easily.* Harry tossed the letter aside and gained himself a quizzical look from his friends. "Here," he said, "have a read of this." He passed the letter along to Ron, who read it and then passed it on to Hermione.

"This is a great honour, Harry," she said after reading the letter.

"Yeah," agreed Ron. "Looks like Fudge has finally pulled his head out of his arse."

"Too little, too late," said Harry. "It's practically his fault the dementors are with Voldemort to begin with. If he'd just bloody listened to begin with, that family would still have their souls...."

He turned away from his friends as this memory pained him. He blamed himself for not being quick enough. Hermione guessed some of his feelings. "You can't keep beating yourself up over that, Harry," she said. "If anyone's to blame its Vol- Voldemort."

Harry turned and looked her straight in the eyes. For a brief second she saw the pain there, the pain he kept so well hidden just desperate to get out. He wanted to tell his friends something, to be comforted by someone, anyone. The only problem with that she thought, was that he didn't really have anyone. He never got to know his parents and Sirius, the closest thing he's ever had to a parent, had died last year. She thought of all the evil he'd fought through just to get where he is today, and the thought made her want to cry. A brief second later Harry had hidden the pain again.

"You're right...." he sighed, "but that doesn't mean I won't make him pay."

He said this with such ferocity that Ron backed away, but Hermione saw this as her chance. "Harry... is there... is there something you're not telling us?" He looked at her again, and again she saw the brief flash of pain in his emerald eyes.

Harry hesitated. Could he tell them? The prophecy? Should they know? Voldemort might come after them if he knew they knew. He was already coming after them because he had refused to join his Death Eaters, but it would be such a relief to share this with someone. "No, Hermione... there's nothing...." he finally said. He saw the look of disbelief on her face and took this as a sign to start his work.

"Harry, yo-" Ron began.

"You three back there stop talking and get on with your work," said Professor McGonagall strictly. Harry was thankful for her interruption; he didn't want to continue this conversation.

The rest of this double period past in relative silence as Harry dodged his friend's whispered questions and worried looks. *Won't they just accept that I can't tell them*, he thought as he evaded Ron's third attempt. *How am I supposed to tell them that I was born to die or murder?* As this went on and on Harry wished the bell would go, and ten minutes later it did.

BBBBRRRRRIIIINNNNGGGGG!

"Good day everyone," said Professor McGonagall. "Anybody who did not finish their notes will do so for homework. I will be checking them this Friday. Dismissed."

As the Ravenclaws and Gryffindors filed out, Harry hung back. "Come on, Harry," said Ron. "Magical Creatures, don't want to be late."

"It's all right, Ron, I'll catch up. Just got to ask McGonagall something...."

Ron and Hermione left the room, walking very close to each other. Harry wondered how long it would take for Ron to tell her how he felt. It was obvious, the looks Ron gave her when he thought no one was looking, the way he always sat next to her in class, and of course, his *god damn* hostility towards a certain Bulgarian Quidditch player. He must have been thinking about this for longer than he thought, because when he turned around Professor McGonagall was standing there.

"Yes, Potter?"

"Oh... Professor, I...em... I just wanted to ask you about becoming an Animagus..."

She stared at Harry intently, and then, to Harry's relief, a rare smile spread across her face. "I was beginning to wonder how long it would take you to ask me that, Harry."

Harry's relief increased at the use of his first name. That was always a good sign. "So you'll teach me?" Harry asked hopefully.

She regained her calm, strict exterior. "I'll have to ask the headmaster, but due to the -er- difficult circumstances surrounding your safety I'm sure he'll agree."

Harry understood. Being an Animagus may help him greatly if Voldemort tried anything. He turned to leave but then stopped. "Professor."

"Yes, Potter?"

"Did you- did you know that my dad was an Animagus?"

She pursed her lips. "Yes... a stag I believe," Harry nodded. "Your father never did set many standards to abide by the rules. He and Sirius Black

lost more points for Gryffindor than the rest of the house combined. Still holds the record for most number of detentions ever. Though I do understand why he became an Animagus... Remus was lucky to have him as a friend...." Harry saw that her eyes had tears in them; he thought it was probably best if he left.

"Thank you, Professor," he said.

"Its okay, Harry. I'll speak to the headmaster at lunch."

Harry nodded and began to limp his way out of the room. He hadn't expected her to ask Dumbledore that soon.

Harry arrived at Hagrid's hut just as Hagrid himself emerged from it. He moved his way through the crowd of students towards Ron and Hermione, who were, whether they knew it or not, standing very close to eachother. "What did you want to see McGonagall for?" asked Ron, as Harry limped up next to him.

"Oh... I ...em... just wanted to see if I missed anything important last week," he lied. Ron seemed to accept this. Harry thought to himself for a moment about just how much he was now keeping secret from his friends. He made a mental list: *The Prophecy, his being the heir of Gryffindor and having a sword in his arm, and now the fact that he might be training to become an Animagus soon.*

"Mornin' everyone," began Hagrid. "Nothin' new today I'm afraid. Jus' got some Krups tha' need lookin' after. A collective sigh of relief could be heard spreading through the group as they realised that Hagrid didn't have any new monsters. That they would be looking after some safe, normal Krups. A Krup was basically a Jack Russell Terrier with a forked tail. "Now there's enough o' them for one between two, so I think we'll 'ave one Gryffindor and one Ravenclaw as partners. In the spirit of in'erhouse relationships and all. Now find yerself a partner from a different 'ouse.

Harry looked around. He'd just noticed that they were still with the Ravenclaws from Transfiguration. No one seemed to be moving, most people didn't really know people from other houses and things were getting very awkward. "Come on," said Hagrid. "Find yerself a partner or

I'll pair yer up with someone like a bunch o' third years."

Still no one moved. Harry decided to make the first move. He limped through the crowd until he was up front where everyone could see him; he then walked around the inner rim of the circle until he came to Padma Patil. He stopped. "Would you like to be my partner, Padma," he asked.

She was somewhat taken back by this. "Oh... Harry... y- yes. I mean... of course, I- I'd love too." Harry saw her blush slightly and then caught himself smiling.

"Good man, Harry," said Hagrid. "See you lot, it's not tha' 'ard." After Harry had 'broken the ice' people were moving about in the crowd meeting and talking to other people they wouldn't normally. Ron became partners with Terry Boot and Hermione ended up with Mandy Brocklehurst.

After Hagrid had handed out the Krups, he told them to go off with their partners and walk them around the grounds. Harry and Padma set off along the edge of the Forest. Their Krup was a rather fat, scruffy male that walked with a limp. "It's an ugly little thing, isn't it," commented Harry once they were out of earshot of Hagrid.

"Oh, stop that," Padma laughed and hit his arm playfully. "I think he's gorgeous." She bent down and started patting the Krup.

"So you got a thing for guys with limps," said Harry, trying to sound charming as he limped along with his cane but failing miserably when he started laughing. Padma just blushed and looked away.

They were approaching the edge of the Forest now and Harry didn't want to get any closer, not now he knew it was home to a giant, an unruly mob of centaurs, and about a thousand giant spiders, so he steered Padma and the Krup towards the lake. "What do you wanna call him?" she asked as they walked by the lake.

"Call? Call who?" Harry was lost.

"The Krup of course."

"Oh... well how about... Dexter?"

She laughed. "That's a terrible name isn't it," she said, once again kneeling down and talking to the Krup. "How about," she turned and smiled up at Harry. He thought she looked incredibly pretty. "How about, Little Harry?"

"What?" it was Harry's turn to laugh now.

"Oh come on, it's a good name, and it suits him. He's got a limp like you, and his hair is all scruffy like yours used to be." She was smiling again and Harry thought he couldn't say no to that smile.

"Fair enough," he laughed. "Little Harry it is."

They spent the rest of the walk around the lake talking about what they did over the summer. "Well me and Parvati went to France to visit some family over there. We spent most of the summer there. Paris is just beautiful, have you ever been? I had never been before...." Harry just let her talk as they made their way back up to Hagrid's hut. It was good to be able to talk about something other than Voldemort. "What did you do over the summer, Harry?" She immediately looked sorry for asking this, as it was common knowledge his summer had been somewhat... difficult.

"I -er- I went to the gym a lot...."

"Hmm... It shows," Harry looked at her and saw she was once again blushing, and, he just realised, so was he.

They were the first back at Hagrid's; all the other partners were still out and about somewhere. "All right, Harry," he said.

"Hey, Hagrid."

"Where's yer Krup yer two?"

Harry looked around. Little Harry was nowhere to be seen. Padma took the matter into her own hands though. She whistled and then started calling, "LITTLE HARRY." Whistle. "LITTLE HARRY."

Harry was thankful they were the only people back. He looked at Hagrid, who was trying and failing, to suppress a laugh as the Krup came limping

from behind a rock. "There yer ar'... *Little Harry*," he said as the Krup limped over to him.

"He's just beautiful, isn't he," said Padma.

"Oh aye," said Hagrid, as small tears of laughter fell down his face and into his big, bushy beard. "Just beautiful."

Harry found himself smiling even though Hagrid's laughter was at his own expense. That was until Little Harry decided to mark his territory on Big Harry's robes. Harry looked down and saw what the Krup was doing. "Oh you little bast-"

"Harry," said Padma through her laughter, "leave poor Little Harry alone."

Harry looked up and saw that she was holding her sides as she continued to laugh. Hagrid had had to sit down as he was laughing so hard. Harry pulled out his wand and pointed it at the wet patch on his robes. "Scourgify," he said, his robes becoming clean.

As they waited for the rest of the class to return, Harry sat next to Padma on the grass and they just talked, talked about meaningless things. Harry would look back on this time later and realise he hadn't been this happy since before he'd touched that damned Triwizard cup back in his fourth year. He didn't know how long he sat there listening to her talk, but eventually he realised that she was looking at him strangely.

"I said are you okay, Harry, you don't look too well, are you tired?" He looked into her deep blue eyes and saw the concern there.

"I- I am a little tired... I don't sleep very well."

Padma looked like she wanted to ask why, but she didn't push the issue. Other groups had started to return now and Hagrid was putting the Krups back in their boxes. "It was nice talking to you, Harry," said Padma.

"You too," agreed Harry. Padma got up and walked over to her usual crowd of Ravenclaws, Harry watched her go. "It was really nice talking to you," he said to himself.

Harry, Ron and Hermione hung back after everyone else had left. They wanted to ask Hagrid something. "Hagrid," said Harry.

"Yer want somethin' Harry?"

"We were just wondering how your... brother was?"

"Oh, well he's fine. Still in the Forest. Asks about yer sometimes," he said, turning to Hermione. "Asks fer Hermy."

"Well... that's... nice," stuttered Hermione.

"You going up to the castle for lunch, Hagrid?" asked Ron.

"Yeah, how abou' we go then."

Harry, Ron, Hermione and Hagrid made their way up to the castle. The four long house tables in the Great Hall were filling up under the sunny blue ceiling, which was just like the sky they could glimpse through the high windows. The three of them took there usual place at the Gryffindor table and Hagrid said his goodbyes and walked up to the staff table.

Lunch was its usual uneventful affair, that is, until Ron and Hermione started asking what Harry was hiding from them again. "Its nothing..." he lied.

"Come on, Harry, we know you to well. You're hiding something," said Ron. Hermione nodded in agreement. "We're your best friends you can tell us."

"If there was anything to tell I would-"

"We know-"

"LOOK," Harry rose from his chair, his temper getting the better of him. "Did you ever stop to think that there might be a reason why I wasn't telling you something, that it was for your own damn good? Please, for the love of god, stop pushing it." And with that he stormed out of the Hall and headed for his next class, thirty minutes early.

He arrived at DADA room 2, to find, and it wasn't much of a surprise, that

he was the first one there. He opened the door and let himself in. Harry had never been in this room before. It was a lot larger than the other Defence room, desks and chairs were placed against three of the walls (so if you leaned back you could rest your back on the wall) about seventy of them. This left a big empty space in the middle of the room that was about twenty-five by thirty metres. Against the fourth wall was a small raised platform with a teachers desk on it, presumably were the teacher stood thought Harry.

He took a seat against the back wall in the corner. He suddenly felt very tired and found himself with his head in his arms on the desk, as the world around him grew dark.

"Harry, Harry, HARRY!" He jerked up and looked around. He was still in the DADA room but it was a little fuller now. Several of the desks were now occupied. "Harry."

He turned to his left and saw Padma Patil standing at the front of a group of Ravenclaw girls. "Hello again," he said sleepily.

"Hi," she sat down next to him, her friends followed suit and filled up the row of desks. "You were sleeping?"

"I guess I was."

"You're lucky I came along and woke you up. What would Professor Dumbledore think if he found you asleep before his lesson had even started?"

"I think he would be highly amused, Miss Patil" said a familiar voice. Harry looked up and saw Dumbledore standing in front of their desk. "Are we rested now, Harry?" he asked. Harry nodded. "Good. Now Professor McGonagall had a word with me over lunch, could you remain behind after class?"

"Sure..." Harry had forgotten about McGonagall asking Dumbledore about the Animagus transformation. Dumbledore nodded and moved towards his desk on the other side of the room.

"What was all that about?" asked Padma.

"Oh -er- haven't a clue." Harry didn't want to lie, but it was probably best if the number of people who knew about his becoming an Animagus was kept to a minimum. *The less she knew the better*, thought Harry looking at Padma. *Don't want to put her in danger.*

The room had been slowly filling up around them. Harry noticed Ron and Hermione looking at him from across the room. *They were only worried about him*, he thought; *I'll make up with them later*. He also saw Malfoy further down the row. This was the first time that Harry had seen him since last year. Malfoy caught Harry looking and gave him his patented Malfoy smirk before turning away and ignoring him. Every desk was full now and Harry turned towards Dumbledore, who was standing on the raised platform.

"Good Afternoon," he began. "I'm afraid to say that you're still stuck with me as your teacher, as I have yet to find a replacement. Now, let's move on to this terms work. I say this terms because that's how long I plan to spend in this area of defence, a term. It will definitely appear on NEWT's." Harry saw Hermione quickly pull out a quill, poised to take notes. Dumbledore continued. "Has anyone here ever performed wandless magic?" Harry saw Dumbledore's gaze shift over his for a second.

"You can't do magic without a wand," said a Hufflepuff Harry didn't know.

Dumbledore smiled. "I beg to differ, maybe if I rephrase my question. Has anyone ever done magic without knowing they were doing magic? Have you done magic when you've not meant to?"

Hermione raised her hand. "Miss Granger."

"Well, when I was younger, before I got my Hogwarts letter. I was at home and I knocked over my mother's favourite china dish, it was her mothers before she died. I was so upset, my mother loved that dish. I remember crying on the floor next to the pieces and then- and then they just fixed themselves, you know? The pieces snapped together and jumped back onto the shelf as good as new. I didn't know it then but I suppose that was some wandless magic."

"Very good, Miss Granger, that's a start," said Dumbledore. "Now emotions. Our emotions affect our abilities with magic. Miss Granger was so upset that she repaired that dish without even knowing she was magical. I want everyone to think about anytime they've been so angry, so upset, or so happy, that they've performed some type of wandless magic." Dumbledore paused to give people time to think. "I can see from the looks on most of your faces that at some time or another most of you have done some wandless magic." Several people nodded in agreement. "Today I want you to concentrate on performing wandless magic while being aware that you are doing it. I want you to summon something to you without the use of a wand. Think of anytime you've been extremely happy, angry or upset. It is much like the Patronus charm, except that that only works with happy emotions."

"Have you ever done any wandless magic before?" Harry asked Padma.

"Not really, just little things. I lit a candle once without magic, just waved my hand over it and it lit. You?"

Harry shrugged. "Made some glass disappear once."

"You want to give it a try?" she asked. Harry nodded.

Harry placed his wand on the desk and Padma did the same. "What now?" asked Harry.

"Don't know. How about," she held out her hand, "Accio wand." Her wand didn't move. "Well that didn't go to well...."

"No..." Harry now held out his hand, he quickly looked at Padma and had a very happy thought. "Accio wand." His wand vibrated and moved a few centimetres towards his outstretched hand.

"Oh! Did you see that Harry? It moved. Try again." Harry looked at Padma again, she was really pretty. Everyone in the room was trying to summon something or other; he heard Accio book, Accio quill and even Accio Neville. Harry tried to block out the noise and concentrate on the task at hand.

"Accio wand," he repeated. This time his wand flew from the desk and into his hand. This must be because he was the heir of Gryffindor.

Dumbledore had said that Godric Gryffindor was famous for his wandless magic.

Padma was clapping next to him. "Well done." Harry put his wand back on the desk.

"Thanks I-" His wand had started rolling down the desk and was about to fall when he reached out to grab it, at the same time Padma did. Her hand closed around Harry's wand and his hand closed around hers. They were frozen like that for a moment before Harry realised what he was doing and quickly removed his hand.

There was a moment of silence before... "He- Here's your wand, Harry," she said, passing him the wand. Harry noticed she was turning a deep scarlet.

"Listen, Padma I-"

"Has anyone succeeded in performing wandless magic?" asked Dumbledore. The room grew silent.

"Harry has," said Padma quickly and before Harry could stop her.

"Mr Potter," said Dumbledore with a knowing look in his eyes. "A demonstration if you will?"

Harry nodded as Dumbledore magically made a cup appear in his hand, he then placed the cup on his palm. "Now, Harry, summon the cup to you."

Harry stood up and raised his arm, his hand outstretched. He concentrated and then... "Accio cup." The cup flew off Dumbledore's palm and landed neatly in Harry's hand.

There were many 'oohs' and 'ahhs' from the assembled students. People were clapping and, Harry noticed, Padma was clapping particularly loud. This made Harry very happy. "Well done, Harry," said Dumbledore, the familiar twinkle in his eyes. "What emotion did you use?"

Harry sat back down. "Happiness," he said with a quick glance at Padma out of the corner of his eye.

"Ahhh yes, my favourite emotion. Very good." Dumbledore turned his attention back towards the rest of the class. "Now I want you all to keep practicing for the next hour, if you manage a summoning charm move on to something else."

Soon the commotion started up again as everyone tried to summon something to them. Harry turned to Padma to see that she was staring at him intently, like she was working up the courage to ask him something. "Harry?"

"What?"

"Wh- what was the... the happy thought you were thinking of when you summoned that cup?"

Harry was taken a back by this. He had been thinking about her and it looked like she knew. *Damn*, he thought. *She's not in Ravenclaw for nothing*. He thought of something quick. "Well... I- I was thinking about -er- Little- Little Harry...."

"Oh," she said, disappointment clearly etched on her face. She quickly recovered. "He was a cute little thing though, wasn't he?"

"Oh yeah, he was just great. Especially when he marked his territory on my robes."

Padma started laughing at this memory and Harry smiled. "Try and summon your wand now, Padma," he said.

"What? Ohh," she said through her laughter. "Accio w-," she laughed. "Em- Accio wand." Her wand vibrated and moved a few inches towards her hand, "Ohhh did you see that. Looks like Little Harry is a happy enough thought for the both of us."

Harry spent the next hour talking to Padma and practicing wandless magic. He was beginning to scare himself as he kept performing different spells without a wand. After the summoning charm he'd performed the banishing charm, the Incendio spell on some parchment

(closely followed by a water charm), and the Reparo charm on a broken quill of Padma's.

"You're really good at this, Harry," she said. "I can barely summon my wand."

"I guess I've just got a knack for it," he shrugged. He and Padma looked at each other for a moment. "Listen Padma I-"

"How are we all fairing now?" asked Dumbledore.

Damn, thought Harry, that's the second time he's done that.

"Do not be discouraged if you haven't performed wandless magic yet, we have a whole term to practice. Although, with that in mind I would like a show of hands as to who has done wandless magic."

Harry and Padma raised the hands, so did two of Padma's Ravenclaw friends, Ron and Hermione, Malfoy, the Hufflepuff Harry didn't know, and finally, to Harry's surprise, Neville.

"Very good," said Dumbledore. "Ten points to each house. Now for the remainder of the period could you please write notes on wandless magic from page 67 of your textbooks."

Harry pulled out his quill and began taking notes, Padma the same. He tried to think of something to talk about but nothing came to mind, so the rest of the lesson past in relative silence. When the bell went Harry said his goodbyes to Padma, collected his things, and approached Dumbledore's desk. The classroom was empty now.

"So Harry, Professor McGonagall tells me you wish to become an Animagus."

"Yes sir."

Dumbledore was silent for a moment. "I agree with you, it would certainly be useful considering how hard it has become protecting you from *him* of late."

"So, Professor McGonagall will teach me?"

"Yes, Harry, you will report to her office at eight o'clock this evening."

"That soon!"

Dumbledore nodded. As Harry was standing there it just struck him that he was nearly as tall as Dumbledore. *When did that happen?* he thought.

Dumbledore put his hand on Harry's shoulder. "I've not had a chance to ask you this yet Harry, but how are you keeping?"

Harry thought before answering. He had not been keeping well. He wasn't sleeping and he'd nearly had his leg blown off in the past week. Not to mention the prophecy that he couldn't go ten minutes without thinking about "As well as to be expected," he finally said.

"Okay, hurry along now, I believe you have Divination?"

Harry nodded and turned to leave, limping all the way out into the hall and up to the North Tower. When he got to the ladder at the bottom of the trap door though, he was stumped. He couldn't get up the silvery ladder with his leg. Everybody else was already up in the room. Harry thought for a moment and then he had an idea.

He pulled out his wand and pointed it at himself, he was about to say a spell... when he had another idea. Harry put his wand away and then pointed his hand at himself. He concentrated on a happy thought and... "Gravios." He felt and saw the beam of light come out of his hand and hit him in the chest. Harry slowly floated up to and through the trap door.

He finished the spell and landed on the floor of the Divination room. "Good day, Mr Potter," said Professor Trelawney. "How nice of you to join us."

"Sorry I'm late," Harry quickly said, limping over to a pouffe and sitting next to Ron. "Had a little trouble getting up the ladder."

"Quite all right, dear, I knew you would be late anyway."

"Uh-huh," said Harry.

Trelawney turned her attention back to the group. "Today we will be

revising the cards, my dears. Partner off and select a deck of cards from the back wall."

Harry turned to Ron. "Listen, buddy," he said. "I -er- I'm sorry about shouting at you at lunch."

Ron didn't say anything for a moment. "It's okay, Harry, we just wish you'd let us in a little more. We're your friends, talk to us."

Harry sighed. "There is something I've not been telling you, but you have to believe me that it's for your own good. And- and I'm also not ready to tell anyone this...." Harry trailed off as the Prophecy interrupted his thoughts.

"Whatever it is," said Ron, "it's changed you. You used to be a lot more fun, you weren't always so serious...."

"Things change, mate."

"Yeah I know... I just wish they didn't have too...."

Neither of them said anything. Harry wondered really how much the prophecy had changed him. "Do you want to go waste sometime predicting our deaths?" asked Harry.

"Sure," laughed Ron.

Ron went and got a deck of cards as Harry pulled himself around to a table. Ron returned with the cards and began shuffling them. "Do you want to go first or should I?" he asked.

"I'll do you," said Harry. Ron handed him the cards and Harry shuffled them himself. Harry then removed the top five cards and placed them face down on the table. "All right," he turned the first card over, it was the destiny card. "Hmm..." The second card was a card with a goat on it. "I think it's your destiny to have a goat," he turned the third card over, a magician. "I really can't be bothered with this," he told Ron.

"Nah, me neither."

"Is something wrong, my dears?" asked Professor Trelawney.

"Er- no, I was just about to do a reading for, Harry."

Trelawney looked between the two of them. "Do you mind if I do Mr Potter's reading?"

"Be my guest," said Ron, who got up to allow Trelawney to sit down.

Harry offered her the deck but she pulled her own out of her pocket instead. Harry's opinion of Trelawney had changed slightly since he'd found out that she could in fact See every now and again. She began shuffling her deck and then placed the top five cards on the table.

The first card she flipped over was the Time card. "Hmm..." She didn't say anything but continued flipping the cards. Time was followed by the Morning card, and then the Magic card, the Death card, and finally the Warrior card.

"What does it say?" asked Harry.

"Well.... the Morning card means these events will happen soon, within a year. But I...."

"What?"

"The other cards do not make any sense... unless...." Trelawney moved her hand over the deck of cards; she paused for a moment before removing the top card and placing it face down on the table, above the third card she drew previously. "A six card draw is extremely rare, Mr Potter," she said with her hand on top of the card that was face down. "If this card depicts a weapon then...." She flipped the card and, lo and behold, there was a picture of a sword.

Harry looked from the card on the desk to Trelawney in the chair. "Now what does it mean?" he asked.

She sighed. "I'm afraid these cards are quite clear in their meaning, they show that you will be present when someone dies, it may be your own death." Harry wasn't surprised but he was still a little edgy, he knew Trelawney could be right occasionally. "You see Magic is next to Death," she pointed to the cards next to each other. "This means that magic will be involved in the death. Time magic will also play a part in this event."

Wow, thought Harry. *I could be an Animagus by March next year.*

"First we have to see if you're suited to becoming an Animagus."

"How do we do that?"

"Have you ever transformed yourself, Harry? Maybe made your limbs longer or hair grow?"

"Yeah... yeah I made my hair grow once. I had it all shaved off and it grew back over night."

"That sounds like the right sort of thing. Now I want you to concentrate on doing it now, make your hair grow. Think about how it looks now, and then think about it being longer, a lot longer."

Harry closed his eyes and imagined how his hair looked in his mind's eye. He saw his new haircut, and then he imagined it how it used to be, all scruffy and unruly. He opened his eyes. "Has anything happened?"

"I'm afraid not," said McGonagall. "Concentrate for longer this time; try to imagine each hair, where it joins your head and where it ends. Take a while, don't try to make it grow right away, memorize how it looks now, before attempting to grow it."

Harry closed his eyes again. He didn't know how long he sat there imagining his hair, but when he thought he'd done it enough, he began to imagine that he wanted it longer, a lot longer. He felt a tingling all over his forehead and he opened his eyes. The first thing he saw was Professor McGonagall smiling at him. "Well done, Harry. Here." She handed him a small, circular mirror.

Harry looked at himself. His hair, which he had had cut short only two days ago, was now shoulder length (he could tie it into a pony tail if he wanted). "Well I'm glad I had that haircut now," he said.

"You can return it to how it was. Think of it getting shorter and it will."

Harry closed his eyes a third time and this time it happened almost

instantly. He felt his head tingling and he opened his eyes. Looking in to the mirror, he could see his hair was back to normal. "That's good, Potter. You've progressed further than I expected already. I think we'll call it a night now though, you look tired, Harry. Have you been sleeping well?"

"Yeah.... sleeping fine. Goodnight, Professor," he said, making his way out of the door.

"Goodnight, Harry, be here at eight o'clock tomorrow night."

Harry left the office and began the quarter of an hour journey back to Gryffindor Tower. He wanted nothing more than to get into bed and sleep for a year. *How much has happened over the last week*, he thought, *Death Eaters, dementors, explosions, high speed broom chases, finding out I'm Gryffindor's heir, have a sword in my arm, and now training to become an Animagus.*

Once back in the common room he limped over to the fireplace and collapsed into his favourite armchair, next to Ron and Hermione. "What did McGonagall want?" asked Ron.

"She -er- just... wanted to see how I was doing... you know, after all that's happened this past week."

His friends nodded, but didn't seem convinced. Harry felt his eyelids dropping as he sat by the warm fire. He shook himself awake before he could fall asleep. "I think- I think I'll have an early night," he told his friends.

"Night, mate."

"Goodnight, Harry."

"Night, you two."

Harry limped up the stairs and into his dorm. It was empty apart from him. He quickly changed into his pyjamas and climbed into bed. Sleep coming as soon as his head hit the pillow.

Chapter 5- In Which Everything Appears Normal

Hope for the best but prepare for the worst.

--English Proverb

Harry awoke in a cold sweat. He'd just been back at the Department of Mysteries, back at the veil.... He had hoped that maybe tonight he would get a good night's sleep, apparently he wouldn't. Harry checked his clock; it was four-thirty in the morning. Groaning, he rolled over and tried to fall back to sleep.

He lay there for half an hour but to no avail, sleep was done with for that night. Pulling himself out of bed he rummaged through his trunk for some clean robes. After exiting the dorm he limped across the landing to the shower room. There was a pale glow of the early morning sun shining through the high window and everything was deathly quiet. Harry wondered if anyone was ever up this early at Hogwarts, if anyone suffered from nightmares like he did. Upon exiting the shower he made his way down into the common room, checking his watch he saw that it was five-thirty.

Harry didn't know what to do with himself, there was at least another hour or two before anyone else would be up. He sat in his favourite armchair by the remaining embers of the fire in silence, his thoughts once again straying towards the prophecy:

'The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches ...

born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month

dies ... and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have

power the Dark Lord knows not ... and either must die at the hand of

the other for neither can live while the other survives ... the one with

the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month

dies ...'

Those words had been permanently etched into his memory; he would never forget them... never. "Harry?" He turned towards the stairs. Standing on the fourth step up was Hermione. "Harry, are you alright?"

"Morning, Hermione, yeah I'm fine. Why wouldn't I be?"

She moved down the stairs and over to the armchair next to him. "It's just... I was watching you from the stairs, a moment ago you had this look on your face... it looked like... sadness... fear."

Harry sighed; she'd caught him unprepared, he didn't have the defences up that he wore most of the day. "No... I'm fine... I'm fine, Hermione." He saw the look of disbelief on her face and quickly changed the subject. "What are you doing up so early?"

"I could ask you that too," she said pointedly.

"I'm...."

"You don't have to be so secretive, you know."

Harry stared at her. Did he? Yes, he told himself. "I think I need to be, Hermione. Look, some pretty big things have happened to me over the past month or two, some things that may need telling... but not now."

"Is it... is it important to the war?"

Harry sighed again. "It practically *is* the war, Hermione. Please... please don't ask me to tell you this."

"It may be easier-"

"No... I have to accept it myself first...."

Hermione looked at him sadly, no one should have to suffer like he has, go through what he's gone through. Tears came to her eyes just by thinking about his life. His parents death in his first year of life, ten years of misery at Privet Drive, Voldemort in his first year, the Basilisk in his second, the Dementors in third year, Voldemort's rebirth in fourth year, and Sirius' death last year. *He hasn't had a single year in his life that*

hasn't gone wrong in someway, she thought. "Okay, Harry... okay. You tell us when you're ready."

Harry nodded and then turned to face the dead fire. "So... Hermione, how's things with Ron?"

"Ron? Things are fine with Ron, why wouldn't they be?" Harry turned to face her while she said this; he saw that her cheeks were tinged a bit.

"Oh, no reason, no reason."

"Harry James Potter, if you are implying-"

"I'm not implying anything, Hermione," he said with a mischievous smile, "not implying anything at all."

"Hmm... I think I'll go take a shower now," she said.

Harry and Hermione walked down to breakfast together an hour later. The ten minute journey, now took fifteen because of Harry and his cane. "I'll be glad when I can get rid of this thing," he said to her as they entered the Entrance Hall.

"Me too. It does slow us down somewhat."

They entered the Great Hall and found that it was just starting to fill up with students and professors. Harry limped to their seat and pulled some bacon towards himself. "What do we have first today?" he asked.

"Let's see... its Double Potions."

"Great," said Harry. "A morning with Severus Snape."

"Now, Harry, you shouldn't talk that way about a professor-"

"I'll never forgive him for what he did last year," he said, interrupting her.

Again she saw the ferocity in his eyes, the anger, she let the issue lie. "Well... just sit up the back and ignore him."

"I plan to do just that." They ate in silence for a few minutes, Hermione keeping what was on her mind to herself.

"Morning, friends," said Ron briskly. "God I'm starving. Pass me those eggs will you, Harry." Harry passed Ron the plate of eggs. "You were up early," he nodded towards his best friend.

"I know, I couldn't sleep."

"Mmmm," Ron mumbled through his eggs, "Yuff bin wakin me up in the middle of the night."

"Slow down, Ron," said Hermione, "chew your food."

Ron swallowed. "Thanks, Hermione. But really, Harry, is it like last year you know, when you kept dreaming about the door at the Department of Mysteries?"

Harry thought for a moment, there was something... he knew it. His dreams of fear and death did seem to circle around a specific event, but what was it...? Now that he thought about it, something was nagging at him. It was there, just in the back of his mind, on the tip of his tongue. As if all at once he knew exactly what it was, and then almost instantly knew nothing. And then it hit him. "There is something... it's like a -er- a *thing*."

"Well that clears that up," laughed Ron. Harry ignored him... there was something?

I see... light," Harry closed his eyes. "There's a big circle suspended in the air... its- its got like fire and lightning in it, and its swirling... around and around. There is so much light." Harry grew silent as he struggled to remember the dream, he saw the circle clearly now, as if he'd always remembered it, but it was the ground surrounding the circle that now got his attention. It was littered with bodies. "On the floor beneath and around the circle there are... bodies. Men, women and children... they're all mangled. There's so many of them, thirty or so. Blood... everywhere. I- that's it... that's all I can remember..." Harry opened his eyes and saw his friends' worried looks.

Ron spoke first. "That's great, Harry. You're dreaming about big, fiery circles of death and with the way your dreams tend to come true...." Ron shuddered.

Harry sighed. "I don't know why I remembered it now; maybe it was just

because I thought about it?"

The three of them finished their breakfast in silence, until the post arrived. "Oh look, Harry," said Hermione from behind her copy of the Prophet. "They've announced that you're receiving the Order of Merlin."

Harry yawned. "Great... let's get to Potions."

He was running, running for all he was worth down the dark, dank alley between the two restaurant buildings on a 104th street in New York City. *Who was this guy?* he thought.

"Listen kid," a voice behind him shouted, "I just wanna talk to you," growled the voice.

He kept running. "Who are you?" he leaped over a garbage can and pulled out his wand. "Leave me alone, old man."

"I'm here with word from Albus Dumbledore." Alastor Moody continued to give chase to the young man, but he was losing him because of his leg, he just couldn't run as fast.

"Never heard of him." He crouched down behind some crates. "Stay where you are, and we'll talk."

Moody was panting as he slowed to a halt. "Damn... kid."

He could see the man through the crates. This bloke had a glowing blue eye and there was something odd about his leg, but he couldn't see what it was in this light. He trained his wand on the man, who was about thirty metres away. "What does *Albus Dumbledore* want with me?" he asked.

"I'm not sure; he just wants to speak with you."

"Not good enough, STUPEFY," He sprang from behind the crates and fired the spell at this old man.

Moody dodged the curse. "KID, would you please just listen. Look I don't have my wand." Moody placed his wand on the ground, well in sight of the boy. "See I'm unarmed-"

"That's your problem, not mine, STUPEFY." Again Moody dodged the curse.

"That's not very good form, kid. Attacking me when I'm unarmed..."

"Nor is the fact that you still have your wand up your sleeve, and that what you put on the ground was nothing more than a stick."

Moody was stunned. He did still have his wand up his sleeve. "How'd you know that?"

"Enough. Leave me alone, Old man." POP!

Moody watched as the boy Disapparated. He sighed and turned to leave. "See you soon, Kid."

"Ten points from Gryffindor, Potter," spat Snape.

Harry, Ron and Hermione were sitting up the back of the Potions dungeon. They had hoped Snape wouldn't be able to hear their whispered conversations, apparently he could.

"That is the second time you have interrupted me, Potter. Do it again and you can expect a detention. Now, if you three would stop discussing your personal lives and turn your attention back to your Potions work. Do I have to remind you, Potter, that you are hanging on by a thread in this class and one fail this year will result in your expulsion from Potions, well?"

"No, sir," said Harry through gritted teeth. "You don't."

Snape glared at Harry and Harry glared back at Snape. He had been in this double period for a little over an hour now and was desperately awaiting the end. Harry began to roughly chop his ingredients. They were making the Panisus potion, which, when drunk, nullified pain for one hour.

Harry wasn't paying attention though, and when Snape came round and inspected his cauldron, a small smirk could be seen playing around the corners of his mouth. "Not off to a good start, Potter," he whispered so

only Harry could hear. "I'm afraid if you keep this standard of work up, we may have to say goodbye to each other." Snape then wrote something on his parchment that Harry was sure was a 'zero' and moved on.

Every minute seemed like an hour to Harry, it was worsened by the fact that he had Double Potions again tomorrow afternoon. Eventually, and to Harry's extreme relief, the period ended. He now had time to relax in Care of Magical Creatures. The three of them made their way out into the grounds. It was a warm day, not hot, but still warm. Harry could see the rain clouds though, away in the distance, and wondered if it would rain today and ruin the warmth. Soon they arrived at Hagrid's, at the same time as the Ravenclaws.

Harry looked over at the Ravenclaws and caught Padma's eye. She smiled and waved to him, he did so back. Hagrid emerged from his hut a short time later. "Everyone 'ere? Good. Nothin' new today, still waitin' on a -er- special delivery. So yer'll be lookin' after the Krups again."

A murmur spread through the group as people speculated at what Hagrid's 'special delivery' could be. Harry voiced their concerns. "What's your special delivery, Hagrid?"

Hagrid gave the group a small smile. "Somethin' yer'll like, I guarantee it'." This did nothing for the group's confidence. Hagrid was sure they would like the Blast Ended Skrewts. "Now same as las' time. Find yerself a par'ner and grab a Krup from the boxes behind me 'ouse."

Harry looked over towards Padma. "I'll see you guys later," he said to Ron and Hermione. Hermione nodded and Ron gave him a knowing look and the thumbs up sign. Harry smiled and shook his head at Ron before limping over to the Ravenclaws. "Morning, Padma," he said.

"Morning, Harry." Her friends gave her the same knowing look that Harry had just received from Ron and moved away to leave her alone with Harry. "Do you want to be partners again?"

"Of course." Harry thought he sounded just a bit too eager. "Er- should we go get Little Harry?"

After Magical Creatures and lunch, they had Charms. Harry had enjoyed

spending more time with Padma, and was looking forward to seeing her in Charms. The three of them entered Charms room 2. It was identical to the DADA room 2, apart from the fact that this room had cushions in a big pile against the left wall. Harry, Ron and Hermione sat along the right hand row of desks that were against the back wall. The room filled up around them and Harry saw Padma sit opposite him on the other side of the room.

Professor Flitwick entered through a small wooden door that connected this room to an anteroom through the front most wall. The small wizard climbed up onto a specially erected wooden podium, so that he was at eye level with most people in the room. "Good Afternoon, everyone." Flitwick beamed at the assembled students. "Today we're going to be learning a charm that can be helpful in a tight situation. Now, has anyone ever heard of the Prosonus charm?" As was to be expected, Hermione raised her hand. "Miss Granger."

"The Prosonus charm or *Prosono* is a spell that, when cast, causes the user to be temporarily immune to physical attack. That said, the user can still be hurt by magical attacks."

"Well done, Miss Granger, five points to Gryffindor." Hermione smiled and Flitwick turned his attention back to the class. "As you just heard, the Prosonus charm can protect you from any physical attack. Things like kicks and punches are rendered useless when you're under this charm. Also, it can protect you from non-magical weapons; you cannot be stabbed with a knife or shot by Muggle weapons. This charm is highly useful in a dangerous situation and I can also guarantee that it will appear on the end of year exam." Everyone perked up at this. "Now, can we have a volunteer pair to try the charm. Er- how about Mr Potter and Mr Weasley?"

Harry and Ron exchanged a quick look and then walked (Harry limped) into the centre of the room. Every eye was on them as the two stood in the centre. "Good. Now cast the spell on yourself, Mr. Weasley. *Prosono*."

Ron raised his wand and pointed it at himself. "Prosono!" A jet of blue light shot out of his wand and into his chest. "I don't feel any different,"

Ron said, looking confused.

Flitwick was smiling. "Not to worry, Mr. Weasley. Mr. Potter, could you please attack your friend."

"What? Ar- are you sure he can't feel anything?" asked Harry.

"Quite sure. As long as you don't attack him by any magical means then he won't feel a thing." Harry saw that Flitwick appeared quite confident, and Harry knew him well enough to know that he cared for the students well being.

"Okay... ready, Ron?" said Harry, raising his cane above his head. Ron nodded, though he looked somewhat nervous. Harry brought his cane down in one swift movement and it connected with Ron's stomach. Harry expected Ron to double over in pain, but Ron just stood there and let out an audible sigh.

"See everyone, Mr. Weasley is unaffected. Well done you two," said Flitwick nodding to Harry and Ron. "You can go sit down now."

The rest of the lesson was spent practising the Prosonus charm. After several more whacks with the cane, Ron was sure he'd got the charm down, and now took turns with Hermione at pelting Harry in the stomach with a chair. "This is amazing," said Harry. "How many times could we have used this charm over the years?"

'Oh, at least a dozen," said Hermione.

After Charms Harry and Ron said goodbye to Hermione and made their way to Divination. This period was with Professor Firenze, the centaur, down on the ground floor. Harry gave Firenze a lot more respect when it came to Divination than he did Trelawney. Firenze knew what he was doing.

Upon entering Firenze's room the scenery changed from stone walls, to green forest. As Firenze was unable to return to the real Forest, he had had the room converted into the Forest at night with the heavens as they would normally appear. The centaur himself was standing in the centre of a ring of trees, gazing up at the stars. The Gryffindors entered and sat around him in a semi-circle. Firenze looked down, as if only just noticing

the students. His gaze lingered to every one of them and finally to Harry's, whom he kept for the longest. "Good afternoon," he said. "This term I'm going to teach you the basics of reading the stars. We will begin right away. If everyone could find a space for themselves and lie down."

There was a moment given while everyone found somewhere to lie down. "Relax. Let the stars become a blur to you, see them through glazed eyes, it is only then that you can see them clearly. It may take many days, weeks, but eventually you will see pictures through the blur of the stars. Now begin. Look past the stars and on into the galaxy, make them blur. I want you to stay like this for the remainder of this lesson."

Harry watched the stars, he looked through them and they blurred, he- "Harry Potter." Harry was jerked back to his senses. Standing to his left was Firenze. "May I have a word with you?" Harry nodded and followed Firenze away from the rest of the group to the edge of the ring of trees. "I am glad to see you well, Harry Potter."

"Er- thanks, you too."

Firenze nodded, and, for the first time for as long as Harry had known him, he saw the centaur hesitate. "I foresaw in the heavens some of the hardship you have faced recently. Of course it wasn't very clear until it actually happened. Harry Potter, I thought it best for you to know that your fight is only just beginning."

Harry was silent for a minute. "You've seen this?"

"The heavens are... very clear about the future of this world, in fact I have never seen them so clear. Your name, Harry Potter, is written all over them, as is the Dark Lord's."

"You know the outcome of the war!" said Harry astounded.

"No. Only the battle is written, not the outcome." Firenze looked again towards the heavens. "I do know that the choices you will soon make will decide the fate of this world and all those who walk upon it. The weight of the world, Harry Potter, will be placed upon your shoulders."

Harry thought for a moment, this was definitely not what he had expected to learn this lesson. "Great," he finally said. "Anything else I

should know?"

Either Firenze ignored the sarcasm or just didn't pick up on it, Harry didn't know. "You know of the circle of light, Harry Potter?"

"Circ- Y- yes. Yes I've had dreams about a circle filled with light." Harry was eager to learn more about this.

Firenze nodded in a way that made Harry think that he'd just made up his mind about something. "Very well," Harry thought he said this more to himself. "Death surrounds this circle. I see your path drawn towards it. You'd do well to avoid it at all costs."

"That won't be easy if I don't know what I'm supposed to be avoiding."

Firenze wasn't listening; he was once again staring intently at the sky. "There is one more thing, Harry Potter." Firenze looked him straight in the face with his astonishing blue eyes. "The woman you love... she will die at the hand of your enemy."

"Woman I- who is this?" Harry couldn't think of any woman that he loved. He loved Hermione, sure. But he was pretty certain Firenze meant someone else.

"Her name is not written," said Firenze.

"Of course it isn't," sighed Harry.

"She will die; there is nothing you can do to stop this. It is her choice to die. She will do it for you."

Harry was quite unnerved now. Who did he know that would die for him? His mother had but she couldn't die again, who else? No one... "She's not dead yet. Which means it can be changed."

Firenze shook his head while gazing at the stars, and then he appeared to be confused. "It also says she will live and die, and yet live again... I do not know how to unravel this; perhaps know one is meant to?" Firenze sighed and passed his hand over his eyes. "You should return to gazing at the heavens, Harry Potter. Consider yourself forewarned."

Harry nodded and limped back in to the clearing. He didn't feel

forewarned. *What has he told me*, he thought. *Not much really, no names, no dates. Just that people will die and I'll have to worry about the world.* He was definitely sick of all the damn prophecies. Harry resumed staring at the sky, but he couldn't concentrate anymore. This was just another thing he had to add to the mess that was his life.

It was dinner time. Harry, Ron and Hermione sat at the table talking about the days events when Ginny placed herself next to Hermione. "Hello you three," she said. "How's things. We've not had much chance to talk lately, what with one thing and another-"

"Ginny," said Ron. "Settle down, you're talking very fast and stupidly."

Ginny stopped. "Oh. Am I?"

"Is everything all right, Ginny?" asked Harry.

She looked at him. "I broke up with Dean...."

Ron looked very happy but quickly covered that up with an 'Ohh I'm sorry' look. Harry was momentarily confused but then he remembered that Ginny was seeing Dean. He looked at Ginny now and wondered why Dean would want to leave her. She was stunning. Harry wondered when she had grown up so much, she was no longer the little girl dying on the floor in the Chamber of Secrets, she had grown into a woman. It shocked him.

"Ohhh. Ginny, I'm sorry," said Hermione.

Ginny sighed. "It's all right.... I suppose he wasn't such a good boyfriend anyway. We hardly talked this year. It's for the best."

"That's right," said Ron. "Now you don't need to worry about boyfriends for awhile-"

"Shut up, Ron," Hermione and Ginny said in unison.

Harry laughed and shook his head, in so doing he caught a glimpse up at the top table and saw Professor McGonagall stand and gaze at him pointedly. *Oh damn*, he thought *Animagus....* He stood up and caught his fiends in mid argument. "I've -er- got some things to do, I'll see you

later." And before they could ask what these things were he limped away and out the door up to McGonagall's office.

"Good evening, Potter," said McGonagall when he entered. "How are you?"

"Fine," he lied. If truth be told he was worried about what Firenze had told him.

McGonagall nodded. "Now let's see if we can get that hair growing down to a fine art. I want you to practice it now so that you can do it instantly, both growing and returning it to its original state. Here." She conjured a chair and beckoned him to sit. "Practice makes perfect, Harry. I will be grading some essays, tell me if you think you're done.

Harry sat down and got to work on his hair, after ten minutes he was pretty sure that he was doing it instantly. "Professor."

McGonagall had been watching him anyway. "Yes, very good, Harry. I want you to now move on to lengthening your hands and fingernails. The same principles apply, memorize them and make them longer."

Harry spent the remainder of this lesson memorizing his hands and nails. He couldn't get them to grow though, and was now too tired to try anyway. He said his goodbyes to McGonagall and trudged back up to Gryffindor tower. "Casosius," he said the password to the Fat Lady. The common room was busy with students doing homework, playing games, and doing normal day to day things. He found Ron and Hermione still with Ginny at a table near the back of the room. He sat down next to Ron and was thankful when nobody asked where he had been.

"All right, Harry?" asked Ron.

"Yeah...." he said, trying not to yawn but failing. "Though I do think I'm in for an early night again."

"You off to bed then?" asked Hermione.

Harry sighed and rubbed his face with his hands, trying to keep himself awake. "Yeah, yeah I am. Night Ron, Hermione, Ginny."

"Goodnight, Harry."

"Night, mate."

"Goodnight."

Harry limped up the stairs and into the Sixth year dorm. He was not surprised to find that he was once again the first going to bed. He changed out of his robes and climbed sluggishly into bed. Before he could even remove his glasses, he fell into a restless sleep.

Everything over the next fortnight passed in relative normality. Harry got up (usually very early) went to his classes, and went back to bed. There was nothing going on outside of Hogwarts. Nobody had seen or heard anything of Voldemort, which, if it were possible, increased the tension of waiting to see what his next move was. Harry was spending more and more time with Padma Patil. He looked forward to walking the Krup with her in Magical Creatures, as Hagrid's 'special delivery' had yet to make an appearance.

The weeks seemed to fly by to Harry. He was extremely busy, what with DA meetings, animagus lessons, and regular daily activities. This wasn't helped by the fact he hardly slept. Though he was thankful that, in Divination, neither teacher had predicted his untimely demise again. His thoughts began to stray more and more towards Quidditch. He would be allowed to play again now that Umbridge had gone. Harry had asked Katie Bell, she was the senior member of the team, she had said that she had been made captain and would be putting the team back together soon. The best thing though, happened on September 26th. Harry went and saw Madam Pomfrey about his cane.

"Well I think that's fine, Potter," she said after examining his leg. "It's left a nasty scar but you should have no more problems with it."

"Scar huh? Just another one to add to the collection."

Harry was very happy when she took back the cane and dismissed him with a clean bill of health. The first thing he did was go and see Katie about Quidditch. He found her in the common room, sitting at a table

with friends.

"Katie," he called.

She looked up from whatever she was doing and walked over to him.
"Harry. Oh look, you got rid of that cane."

"I know, thank god. Anyways, I was just wondering what's happening with Quidditch?"

She smiled. "Just put it up on the notice board. We're gonna need four new players, two beaters and two chasers. With the Weasley's gone as well as Alicia and Angelina, it's just you, Ron and me left. I don't suppose you know anyone who could fill those positions?"

Harry shook his head, he didn't. "No. Sorry, Katie." She nodded and went back over to her table. Harry then *walked* (not limped) over to the notice board.

Gryffindor Quidditch Team

Captain: Katie Bell

Seeker: Harry Potter

Keeper: Ron Weasley

Chaser1: Katie Bell

Chaser2: <to be decided>

Chaser3: <to be decided>

Beater1: <to be decided>

Beater2: <to be decided>

Tryouts for the positions of Chasers2&3 and Beaters 1&2 will be held on Saturday, October 5 at the Quidditch Pitch. Second years and above only.

Harry had no idea who could replace the excellent players they had last year. Looking around the common room he assessed the possibilities.

Dean, Seamus and Neville... maybe Seamus and Dean could be Beaters. Dennis and Colin Creevey... moving swiftly on. Hermione... why'd I even bother. Ginny... could be a Chaser. Erm...

"Harry, over here," said a voice.

He was brought out of his Quidditch player assessing mode because someone had called his name. "Harry." There it was again. It was Ron and Hermione calling him over to the armchairs. He went and sat down.

"Hey, guys. You see the Quidditch notice, Ron?"

"Yeah, don't know who we're gonna get though. Can't imagine anyone in here who's built to be a Beater, maybe Seamus or Dean. Ahhh well... see you've got rid of your cane."

"Just saw Madam Pomfrey, she said I'm as fit as a -er-... a -er-"

"Fiddle," offered Hermione helpfully.

"Yep, thanks, Hermione. Fit as a fiddle," he smiled at his friends. "Sooooo, what are we doing?"

"Well I've got to finish that Transfiguration homework that's due in tomorrow," began Hermione. "And if I've still got to finish that probably means you two still have to start it." She fixed them with one of her McGonagall looking stares. It was true; Harry and Ron did need to start their homework.

"Well I was hoping to play some chess again, now that my legs fixed," Harry said with a sideways look at Ron.

"Why would you need your leg fixed to play-" Hermione began.

"Quick, Harry, run!" said Ron, who was already off towards his chess table. Harry soon joined him. Hermione was shaking her head pointedly.

After three major defeats, Harry thought it best if he got on with his homework. The homework took him and Ron well into the night, and it was gone midnight before they trudged up to bed, utterly knackered. Harry thought nothing could interrupt his sleep tonight... he was wrong.

It was growing. As another person came into contact with its rim, the circle grew. The person who touched it however, was sliced into several pieces. It threatened to engulf him as it grew closer. He could see into its centre now, a thousand images flicked by in quick succession. Images of normal, everyday things; there was a beach, a town, forest, desert, ocean, mountains, city, another town. The images went on and on, always spinning, always changing.

Harry awoke early again, the dream slipping from his waking mind as if it were water in a sieve. He strained to remember it but just like every other night, it was gone. He showered and dressed and went down into the common room, as was his routine of a morning now. Harry spent the time before anyone else would be up practicing his animagus skills; he had a good forty-five minutes before the first people would be emerging from the dorms. Professor McGonagall had been impressed with his progress over the past two weeks. Harry could lengthen his hair and nails in an instant and could also change his limbs. She had asked him last session about what animal he hoped to be. He had given much thought to this, but had come up with nothing. There were so many possibilities: dog, cat, bird, fox, sheep, lion, stag, lemur...? And about a million other creatures. This morning he had brought down his Magical creatures text with him, and was going to pursue the animals in there.

So there he sat alone in the common room, with the book on his lap. He didn't even get past the front cover, because there on the cover of the book was the griffin. The creature on his earring, again it seemed to capture his gaze, drawing him to it like Gryffindors sword. He quickly flicked to the contents and looked up the griffin. *Where are you.... hhhmmm page 57.* Harry flipped to page 57 and the entry on the griffin. It read:

The griffin is an ancient magical creature, where, in its time, roamed every

corner of this planet. Today it is now found rarely in the mountains of North

America and Nepal.

As Harry read, a picture of a griffin roamed the page, roaring

occasionally.

The griffin is more of a cross between to creatures. The eagle and the lion. It

has the head and wings of the eagle, but possesses the hind quarters and paws

of a lion. Griffins are born the size of an eagle and grow to approximately the size of a full grown lion; they can be bigger, depending on the breed. They....

Harry stopped reading and looked at the picture of the griffin. It had a proud eagles head (bigger than a normal eagles head) and a strong, muscular lion's body. He watched as the griffin seemed to run towards him out of the page, just when it would have hit the camera that took the picture it spread an impressive pair of wings that had a wing span of about six feet in either direction. The griffin took flight and flew out of the picture.

That settled it for Harry. Tonight during his animagus lesson, he would tell McGonagall that he wanted to be a griffin. Harry put his book away just as someone came down the stairs that led to the girl's dorm. Harry looked up, it was Ginny. She came down the stairs and was walking across the room when-

"Morning, Ginny," said Harry.

She jumped in surprise. "Harry, you made me jump. Good morning." Ginny now walked back across the room and sat in an armchair opposite Harry. "You're up early."

"Nah, I'm normally up at this time. But this is the first time I've seen you up."

Ginny suddenly looked uncomfortable. "Well I- I have trouble sleeping. I usually just lie in bed until more people are awake but today I decided to get up."

"I don't sleep to well either. Nightmares...."

Ginny now looked concerned. "Nightmares... about... about *him*."

Harry nodded. "Amongst other things...."

Ginny didn't say anything for a minute. "You know, Harry. We- I was so upset when Dumbledore said you were dead...."

Harry looked at her, he hadn't thought that his 'death' may have affected anyone now that he was alive again. "I'm sorry, Ginny."

"Ohhh, Harry, it's not your fault. You don't know how much of a relief it was when you came smashing through the window. It felt so good to see you alive."

Harry laughed. "It didn't feel as good from my end."

"No, I suppose it didn't," she smiled while she said this, and once again Harry was floored by how much she had grown up. "Well, it was nice talking to you, Harry. I'm gonna go get a shower."

"Why did you decide to come with me, Kid?"

"I was tired of running from everything, everyone... this Dumbledore may have something of interest to me."

Alastor Moody and the young man had just Apparated back to England from the States. After chasing him for months the kid had just showed up at Moody's hotel and said he'd decided to come with him. "Is that the only reason?"

The kid was silent for a moment. "I have other reasons, but they're my business, not yours."

Moody sighed and then extended a hand to the kid. "My name is A-"

The kid cut him off. "Alastor Moody. Born 1896 in London, England. Attended Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry in 1907. Left 1914 and joined the Wizards Defence League, now known as the Auror Defence Unit. Brought in the most Death Eaters during the first war. Retired in 1985 with honours as one of the most decorated Aurors of the

twentieth century. Supposedly still in retirement."

Moody was surprised and a little unnerved. "How could you possibly know all that?"

The kid shrugged. "I've read thousands of books on fighting the dark arts, you're in a few of them. I recognised your eye."

"And you remembered all that on me."

"I've got a *very* good memory."

"So it would seem." Moody extended his hand again. "All I know about you is your name, To-"

"NO," the kid said angrily. "His name is not my name. My name is Ethan, okay. Ethan Rafe."

Moody nodded with understanding. "Okay... Rafe."

Ethan shook Moody's hand. "So where are we going, Old Man?"

"We're going to Hogwarts," growled Moody. "You ever been?"

"No... I was gonna. I got my letter and everything... but then my life went to hell on a handcart and things changed. I left England and went to the States. That was six years ago now."

"You should have gone to see Dumbledore, he would've sorted things-"

"I can sort out my own problems... I don't need anyone's help."

"Okay, Kid. Come on, Apparate to Hogsmeade."

In an instant, Moody and Rafe had travelled hundreds of miles across the country and into Hogsmeade. It was still early in the morning and the sun was just rising over the eastern hilltops. The streets were deserted and everything was quite. The two men began walking up the high street along the road to Hogwarts.

"Are you sure you don't know why he wanted to see me?"

"No. He didn't tell me. He said that I had to find you and quick."

"Nice to be needed...."

They arrived at Hogwarts on the dot at seven. Moody limped up the steps, closely followed by Ethan. He opened the giant wooden door and they entered. "Dumbledore's office is a bit of a walk, we'll-"

"Moody?" a voice said from the stairs.

Moody looked up to see who had called him. Standing at the top of the stairs was Harry Potter. "Ah -er- good morning, Harry. How've you been?"

Harry sprang down the steps and walked over to Moody and the stranger. "Past couple of weeks have been hard, but I'm still alive so I can't complain. Voldemort's been a real pain though." The boy next to Moody seemed to move uncomfortably at the sound of Voldemort's name. Harry now turned his attention to the boy. "Who's this?"

"Er- Potter, this is-"

"I'm Ethan, Ethan Rafe." Rafe extended his hand to Harry and he took it.

"Yes... well if you don't mind, Potter, we have to go see Dumbledore."

"Oh, sure thing. I'll see you round, Moody. Nice to meet you, Ethan."

Moody and Rafe nodded to Harry and then moved on up the stairs. Harry watched them go for a moment and then turned into the Great Hall. "So that was Potter...." said Rafe to himself once they were up the stairs. Ten minutes later they were standing outside the gargoyles that led to Dumbledore's office. It was already open so Moody and Ethan walked up and knocked on the door.

"Come in," said a voice from within.

Moody opened the door and walked in, Rafe behind him. "Dumbledore, I've got him."

"Alastor! This was unexpected, but do sit down." Dumbledore stood up when he said this and conjured an extra chair next to the one in front of his desk. "You to, Tom-"

"My name is Ethan Rafe," said Rafe evenly.

Dumbledore wavered for a moment. "Of course, please sit, Alastor, Ethan." He gestured towards the wooden chairs before his desk. They sat. "It's nice to finally have you at Hogwarts, Ethan."

"What did you want?"

"Perhaps we should have some tea?"

"No thanks. What did you want with me?"

Dumbledore sighed. "I want you to come to Hogwarts."

"I'm here. That's not all you want though, if you wanted me to come to Hogwarts you would have sent someone after me six years ago."

"You are very astute, Ethan," said Dumbledore. "I would also like you to watch over a certain student. You probably know this person."

Rafe thought for a moment. "...Potter. Why would you need me to watch over him? I've heard he can look after himself."

"He can. I want you to teach him a few things though. I'm sorry for not coming to find you six years ago, you were believed to be dead. Once I discovered you were alive I sent someone to bring you here." He nodded towards Moody. "I wanted you to become a student, and, if you could, teach Harry a thing or two you've learned over your time spent in America."

"Are you sure this is a good idea, Dumbledore?" said Moody. "No offence, Kid."

"None taken, Old Man."

"Yes, Alastor. I think Mr. Rafe could be valuable to our cause." Dumbledore now turned his attention back to Ethan. "Well, Ethan?"

"So let me get this straight. You want me to come to your school and baby-sit Potter. What's in it for me?"

"Wouldn't you like to further your magical education?" said Dumbledore seriously.

"I've learnt a lot over the past six years. Probably a lot more than this place could've taught me."

"Then what about someone to call a friend for a change?"

Rafe looked away. "I don't need anyone...."

"I think you do. Please, Ethan, do this."

Rafe didn't say anything for a moment. "What do you want me to teach Potter?"

Dumbledore held Ethan's gaze. "Alastor told me that when he discovered your... residence... in New York city. He found some highly advanced magic books... some books on subjects no one your age should yet know or learn."

"You want me to teach Potter a few tricks that are, shall we say... not legal until he's of age?" Dumbledore didn't say anything. "Okay, I'll stay."

Dumbledore now smiled. "Excellent. Let's go down to the Great Hall and get you sorted."

"Sorted? What's sorted?"

Dumbledore stood up and led the way across the room. He took down an old and patched hat from one of his many shelves. "You will see. I suppose you could both do with a spot of breakfast?" Rafe and Moody nodded. "Then let us go to breakfast."

Dumbledore, Moody, and Rafe began to walk towards the door, but had to stop halfway when Rafe stopped walking. "Aaaarrghh," he cried, pulling up the sleeve of his jumper and grabbing the inside of his left arm. Dumbledore turned and his face became grave.

"I had forgotten about that, Ethan. Does it burn?"

"What do you think," said Rafe through gritted teeth.

Moody had removed his wand and now had it pointed at Rafe. His face twisted in anger. "You're a *Death Eater*, Kid...."

"Alastor, put the wand away," said Dumbledore putting his hand on

Moody's wand arm.

"Dumbledore, he's got the Mark."

"He's had it since birth, Alastor. As soon as he was born. You'll have to trust me, he has never and hopefully will never serve Voldemort."

"Yeah... Old Man, put it away." Rafe had now let go off his arm, but Moody could tell that it still burned. Moody lowered his wand.

"Sorry, Kid."

Rafe said nothing as they now continued down to the Great Hall. He'd pulled the sleeve back down on his black jumper to hide the Mark. *What am I doing?* he thought. *Should have stayed in the US....* Moody and Dumbledore were discussing something but he couldn't hear what it was. Soon enough they had arrived at the Hall. Upon entering, hundreds of eyes turned towards the newcomers, everybody in the Hall was looking at him and Moody. It made him uncomfortable. They walked between two of the four biggest tables he had ever seen. These tables were now mostly full of students glancing around to look at him. He saw Potter at one of these tables and gave him a small nod, Potter returned it.

"Who's that with Moody, Harry?" asked Hermione. "He seemed to know you."

"Well we just met about forty-five minutes ago in the entrance hall. He came in with Moody when I was coming down the stairs. His name's Ethan -er- Ethan... Rafe, yeah... that's it."

Hermione stared at this stranger. She couldn't help but notice that he was very handsome. He was about six feet tall. He had broad shoulders and was quite muscular. There was a look about him, a powerful look, a not to be messed with look. His brown hair was cut short and pushed back. This made his face more prominent. As he passed their table she could see that he had blue eyes, though they seemed dull. She also noticed that his nose was slightly irregular, as if it had been broken more times than it should have. There was also a small scar on it. His face was covered with the fuzz of early morning hair, he hadn't shaved. It made him look older than she could tell he was. If she had to give him an age,

it probably would've been sixteen or seventeen. He had his hand in his pocket inside his black jeans, he may have been holding his wand. But then something else struck her as odd. This 'Ethan' was wearing Muggle clothes. He was the only one in the Hall, probably the school, to be doing so.

Moody, Dumbledore and Rafe had now reached the staff table. Moody pulled Rafe over to the side of the Hall, next to a table that had a group of students with green emblems stitched to their robes. Dumbledore was now standing at the middle seat up on the high table. He had raised his hands for silence, and he got it. Every student had turned their attention towards Dumbledore. "Good morning, everyone," smiled Dumbledore as he surveyed the people before him. "A few notices before today's lessons and I'll be out of your way. First, I would like to announce that I will no longer be teaching Defence Against the Dark Arts. Alastor Moody," Moody stepped forward and walked up on to the staff table, where he sat in an empty chair next to Dumbledore, "will be taking over that position at last. I must stress that none of you have ever been taught by Alastor Moody before. And second, I am happy to announce that today a new student will be joining our number, Mr. Ethan Rafe." Rafe now stepped forward and moved into the centre of the room. "Mr. Rafe has come from... overseas and plans to continue his magical education here at Hogwarts. He will be entering into his sixth year." Dumbledore now conjured a stool that appeared behind Rafe. "Ethan, if you will."

Rafe nodded and sat on the chair, he wondered why he was being put on display in front of the entire school. An elderly witch he didn't know now came over to him carrying that old and scruffy hat. She placed it on his head and it slipped down over his eyes. *This is stupid* he thought, *What am I-*

"Well this is interesting," said a voice. It took Rafe a moment to realise that the hat was talking. "The obvious choice would Slytherin but.... hhhmmm, powerful... yes and there's bravery. Slytherin would suit you considering who you're descended from."

"No," Rafe told the hat. "Don't put me in his house."

"Well if that's what you want. GRYFFINDOR!"

The elderly witch removed the hat from his head and cheers erupted from a table to his left. *Now what?* he thought, *What am I supposed to do now?*

"Go sit at that table, Mr. Rafe," said the witch. "That's your new house, Gryffindor." He nodded and walked calmly over to the table and took a seat at the end of the row.

"I wonder what school he came from?" said Hermione.

"He had a bit of an American accent mingled in with a Londonish one when I met him in the hall. My money's on somewhere in America."

"Well there are a lot of fine schools over there. Soren's Academy, Grasmere, Bowness. Many fine colleges too."

"You can ask him in Transfiguration next. He's a sixth year, he should be there," said Ron.

The bell rang that signified the end of breakfast. A thought just occurred to Rafe, he didn't know where to go. This castle was huge, where did he have to be? There was a tap on his shoulder and he spun round. It was Dumbledore. "I would like a final word with you, if I may, Ethan." Ethan nodded and followed Dumbledore once again up to his office, as the rest of the school whirled around him, all trying to get where they needed to be. "Canary Cream."

Rafe walked behind Dumbledore as they ascended the stairs to his office. Once there Dumbledore gestured for him to sit. Rafe stood. "I have brought you here to give you your timetable." He handed Ethan a piece of square parchment. "I believe you'll find that Harry Potter will be in every one of those lessons." Rafe nodded. "Also, I believe you need some supplies." With a quick flick of his wand a trunk appeared before Rafe, another quick flick and there were a few sets of black robes in the trunk, and with a final flick, several books and supplies appeared in the trunk. "This should do for now, don't hesitate to come see me, Ethan, if there is anything you need."

"You don't have to do that, you know. I've got a vault at Gringott's my mother left me. I've never touched it though."

"Yes... I'd imagine there would be quite a nice sum in there now. The interest should have accumulated."

"I'll check it out the next time I'm in London." Scanning his timetable he saw his first class of the day. "Transfiguration, huh. Where do I find that?"

"The Transfiguration room of course."

"Of course... where can I find this Transfiguration room?"

"Follow me, Ethan," said Dumbledore happily.

Harry and Ron were sitting at their usual table near the back of the room. Hermione had chosen a seat by herself at the very back of the room behind them. Professor McGonagall was up the front lecturing on the many finer points of the animagus transfiguration. Harry knew and could do most of this stuff, so he had spent the better part of this lesson deep in his own thoughts.

It wasn't until there was a small knock on the door that he was brought back to the present. He turned in his seat as the door opened and in walked Professor Dumbledore, followed by the new bloke Ethan, now dressed in Hogwarts robes.

"Pardon me for interrupting, Professor," began Dumbledore. "But I've just been having a chat with Mr. Rafe here, and I'm afraid he's now late for your lesson."

"That's quite all right, Professor. Would you like to take a seat, Mr. Rafe?" Rafe nodded and sat in the first available seat he saw, at the back next to a girl with a head of bushy brown hair.

"If you're okay now, Ethan," said Dumbledore. "I have some business to attend to."

"Yeah I'm fine, D- Professor. Thanks." Dumbledore nodded, said his goodbyes and left the room.

Everyone in the room still had their attention fixed on the newcomer.

McGonagall cleared her throat loudly and made the assembled students jump back into learning mode. "Thank you," she said. "Mr. Rafe we are currently taking notes on the Animagus transfiguration. Quill and parchment for now."

Bugger, thought Ethan. Everything was in the trunk he'd left with Dumbledore. Looking around the room he saw that most people had turned their attention back to the professor up the front of the room. He noticed that Potter was sitting in front of him, next to the boy with red hair. He turned to the girl next to him.

"Hello," he whispered.

She looked up from the parchment she was writing on, Rafe saw that almost every inch of it was covered with notes. "Hi," she replied casually. "My names, Hermione."

"I'm Rafe, Ethan Rafe."

She smiled. "I know. Where do you come from, Ethan? Dumbledore didn't make any specific reference, he just said 'overseas'."

Rafe hesitated, and he saw that she noticed this. "I -er- came from America. Been there the past six years. Before that I lived here in England."

Hermione was now really interested. "What school did you go to over there? I mean I've heard of a few good ones; Soren's, Bowness."

"I went to... Bowness," he lied. Rafe hoped she didn't notice this. It wasn't really a lie. He had been to Bowness, but he hadn't been a student there.

"Well I bet that was nice. Right on the Californian coast line isn't it?" Rafe nodded. "Well Hogwarts will definitely be a big change for you then. Not much sunshine in these parts."

"Yeah... big change."

There was a moment of awkward silence while a new topic of conversation was searched for. "So... where do your parents live?" asked Hermione.

The moment she said this she wished she hadn't. The look on his face told her that she had touched on a sensitive subject. "My -er- mother died a long time ago now. And my father... he's dead too."

Hermione felt very sorry for this boy. "I'm sorry," she said quietly.

"It's okay. I got over it."

Hermione got the impression that he hadn't got over something. She let it lie. "So... what lessons have you got today?"

Ethan stared at her for a moment before answering; she was very pretty, in her own way. "Well I'm not sure," he said. "Hang on." He ruffled around in his right pocket under his robes. What no one knew about his pocket was that he had enlarged it magically. He had his wand in there, a small hipflask filled with Ogden's Firewhiskey, about ten galleons, a key to a vault at Gringott's, and a special dagger he'd picked up in a small wizarding shop in America. This dagger was about eleven inches long from handle to blade, the blade being seven inches long. The handle was black and the blade had runes running up the length of it. He kept it sheathed in a black, dragons hide sheath. His pocket looked normal from the outside, like it held nothing. Ethan found what he was looking for, the timetable. "Okay... I have Care of Magical Creatures next."

"Me too," said Hermione happily.

"Aha. Then I have -er- Double Charms... and finally Divination."

"Well I'm in all of them except Divination. I don't much care for it. You'll be with Harry and Ron for that." She nodded towards her two friends at the desk in front of her. "You've probably heard of Harry, most people have." Ethan nodded but didn't say anything. "And next to him there is Ron Weasley."

"Okay.... And who is that over there that Pot- Harry keeps staring at?" Rafe pointed towards a girl sitting across the room, she had a blue emblem on her robes. He had seen Harry stare at her at least four times since he'd enter the room.

"Well I didn't notice he was staring at her. You've got a good eye. That's Padma Patil."

Rafe nodded taking it all in. "The blue on her robes, that means Ravenclaw-"

"If you two would please stop talking," said Professor McGonagall strictly from the front of the room. "And get on with the note taking; I'm sure you'll be surprised to learn something, Mr. Rafe."

"Sorry, Professor," said Hermione quickly, having the good grace to look ashamed.

McGonagall gave her attention back to the class and continued with her lecture. Hermione, not one to upset a Professor, began taking notes again. "So who is that?" asked Ethan.

"Hhmm... Oh! That's Professor McGonagall. She's head of Gryffindor house, and deputy headmistress."

For the rest of the lesson, Hermione talked to Rafe and explained the ways of the school, from things such as what time lunch was, who the Professors were, and where the common room was. Rafe remembered it all. When the bell went, Hermione introduced Ethan to Ron and again to Harry. They walked and talked down to Hagrid's together.

Outside the wind was howling across the grounds, bringing with it thick black rain clouds. It was beginning to get colder in the mornings now. Harry walked on the edge of the group as Ron and Hermione talked to the new bloke. He was thinking, as if he ever thought of anything else, about Voldemort. It was going on three weeks now since the dementor attack, and nobody had heard or seen any sign of Voldemort. It made Harry nervous. Having declined his offer to become a Death Eater, Harry was constantly looking out for his friends. If anything ever happened to them....

Magical Creatures passed in a blur of normality. Hagrid had promised them that within the next week his 'delivery' would've arrived and there would be no more looking after the krups. Harry had partnered Rafe in this lesson and the two of them had become quick friends. Well, not so

much friends but... buddy's. Hermione seemed to like him and Ron didn't have anything against him. Harry thought he seemed lonely. Like he hadn't had much by the way of friends in his life. Whenever they asked him about his past, he answered quickly and then changed the subject.

Harry felt that there was something odd about him. He looked at him and thought he saw a shadow of someone he knew. This boy reminded him of someone. But he couldn't for the life of him remember who. The four of them walked back up to the castle after Magical Creatures, heading to lunch. The weather had taken a turn for the worse, and they dashed the last hundred metres or so up to the entrance as rain came down in torrential torrents.

Back in the entrance hall, Hermione cast a few quick drying spells and their water-soaked robes were dry in an instant. Harry began to walk towards the Great Hall when suddenly he was stopped. Standing in front of the door, as if on guard, was Malfoy, flanked by his two goons Crabbe and Goyle. "Afternoon, Potter," sneered Malfoy, a smirk spreading across his pale face. "Still alive, that's a shame."

Harry felt familiar feelings rising inside him. Feelings that told him to knock Malfoy to the ground... hard. He calmed himself. "Would you step to the side, Malfoy. You're blocking the way." It was true. Quite a crowd had gathered now, all trying to get into the Hall for lunch.

"All in good time, Potter. First things first." Malfoy now looked back behind Harry, and then strode forward and past him. "You must be the new, *Gryffindor*." Malfoy was talking to Ethan. "You'd do well not to get involved with the fabulous three." Malfoy now nodded his head towards Ron and Hermione.

Rafe surveyed the person before him. Potter had called him Malfoy. He had heard about a Malfoy going to Azkaban prison. It had been in the papers, *his* return, the beginning of the second war. Death Eater's had been sent to Azkaban. "I don't know who you are," began Rafe, "but from what I've seen so far I don't like you. Now, get out of the way, you're holding everyone up."

Malfoy sneered and then smirked. "Gryffindors, all alike. You're backing the wrong side."

Harry came and stood by Rafe. "You heard him, Malfoy. Move."

"Shut up, Potter." Malfoy now looked to Ron and Hermione. "How are you Mudblood? Still poor Weasley?"

Ron pulled his wand out and pointed it at Malfoy. "Just give me a reason you slimy git."

Hermione put her hand on Ron's arm. "Let it go, Ron." Ron looked at Hermione and after a moment, he nodded.

Malfoy shook his head in disgust. "Well if you won't do it I will." And with that he withdrew his wand from his robe pocket and pointed it at Ron. "Scorm-"

Harry moved to strike Malfoy, Rafe moved faster. In one quick movement he brought his fist backwards and then sent it pummelling straight into Malfoy's nose. Blood sprayed down Malfoy's face and onto his robes as he fell backwards in surprise. He bit back the pain and looked up at his attacker. Ethan Rafe showed no emotion. He looked down at the person he'd just struck with a calm look on his face.

Now the initial blow was over, Malfoy composed himself. He whispered so only a few would hear him, Rafe included. "One day, one day soon. You will be very sorry you did that." Rafe remained impassive. Malfoy stood, blood dripping freely down his face. With a quick motion of his head, Crabbe and Goyle joined his side, the three of them stood for a moment and then Malfoy gave one last glare, before turning away and heading across to the dungeon stairs that led to the Slytherin common room. Crabbe and Goyle in tow.

There was a silence in the hall as the assembled students stared at Rafe, to see what this new person would do next.

Apparently Rafe wouldn't be punching, nor doing anything else. While rubbing his knuckles with his left hand he turned towards Harry. "So who was that?" he asked.

Chapter 6 - Dream's End

A dream is an answer to a question we haven't yet learned how to ask.

-- Fox Mulder

The events that transpired just before lunch spread through the school like wildfire. Harry could only remember his Quibbler article ever travelling this fast around Hogwarts. Rafe punching Malfoy was the main topic discussed that day. And whether none of the professors had heard about it or Rafe had a 'get out of trouble free' card, Harry didn't know. He wasn't told off for it. Hermione had struggled with her conscience on whether or not to take the matter further, being a Prefect and all. But Ron had talked her out of it. For which Harry and Ethan were very thankful.

It was Friday night and the common room was buzzing with 'end of the week' excitement. Harry had been given the night off from animagus training, owing to the fact that McGonagall now needed to find a griffin for him to be able to continue his training. The four of them were sitting at a table in a secluded corner of the common room. Harry was helping Hermione practice wandless magic; she was highly annoyed that it simply just came to Harry. She could barely summon a quill. Meanwhile Ron, who had a very high opinion of Ethan since he'd hit Malfoy this afternoon, was challenging him to a game of chess. Ethan was giving Ron a run for his money.

"Pawn to E-4," said Ethan. The little pawn moved slowly, he knew he was being sacrificed. It glared up at Ethan.

"Just cannon fodder... That's all I am...." it mumbled.

Ron sat deep in thought for a moment. Weighing up his options. "Hmm... Queen to E-4. Check." The little pawn was dragged off the board kicking and screaming.

Ethan now weighed his options. They weren't many. He moved his king one space to the right. "Your move...."

Ron surveyed the board before sighing heavily with relief. He then

moved his bishop up the board. "Checkmate."

Ethan's pieces started shouting obscenities at him. They didn't take losing well.

"If you'd moved the Queen when I told you-"

"Bloody useless-"

"Not fit to play an accordion, let alone chess-"

Ron cleared away the board before the pieces attacked Ethan. They didn't go quietly but eventually they went. "Good game that. Best I've had in a while. Can't keep beating Harry again and again can I. He's absolutely useless at chess."

"Hey," said Harry, feigning offence. "I'm sitting right here you know."

"Come on, Harry. I want to get this done before DADA with Moody on Monday," complained Hermione. "It doesn't come so easily to all of us as it does for you."

"What's that?" asked Rafe.

"Oh- we're learning wandless magic and Harry just seems to have a knack for it."

Ethan looked at Harry. "A demonstration, Harry?"

Harry nodded and placed his wand on the table in front of him. He raised his arm. "Accio wand." The wand shot through the air and into his outstretched hand. "There you go."

Ethan nodded. "That's what you're learning in Defence Against the Dark Arts? I thought you'd be learning defence?"

"Well it could come in handy," said Hermione. "I mean what if you lose your wand and need to protect yourself."

"I suppose..."

"We might not be doing it anymore anyway," said Ron. "Moody might start something different."

"We'll see on Monday, I suppose. Anyway forget that; let's get started on that Potions essay. Then we can have the weekend free."

Harry and Ron groaned audibly. Ethan on the other hand, stood up and began to walk away. "Hey. Where are you going?" asked Harry.

Ethan turned. "Hmm... Oh! I've just remembered I've gotta ask Dumbledore something. I'll be back in a minute." And with that he left.

Harry watched him go and when he was gone he turned to Ron and Hermione. "So what do you think of him?" he asked his friends.

Hermione thought for a moment but Ron jumped straight in with an answer. "Anyone who hits Malfoy can't be bad."

"He shouldn't have done that," said Hermione.

"If he hadn't then I'd probably be in the hospital wing sleeping off the after effects of whatever curse Malfoy was about to fire at me," argued Ron.

"That's probably true," piped in Harry. "So, Hermione, what do you think of him?"

"Well... I think, I think he's hiding something. He hasn't been completely honest, but I don't think he's lied to us. There's something about him, he's... mysterious. The strong, silent type. And I also think he's pretty lonely. His parents are dead, you know. Told me in Transfiguration. I think he could use a friend or two...."

"Poor bloke...." said Ron sadly. "Well anyway. Do you want to play some chess, Harry?"

"Oh! Ohhh.... Well, well, well. Now you want to play with me. I thought I was absolutely useless at chess?"

Ron laughed. "You are. But that still doesn't mean I won't get any satisfaction from beating you."

Harry began to laugh as well. "Thanks but no thanks. I wanna get that Potions work out of the way."

Ron shrugged and then sighed. "Potions it is."

After thirty minutes of writing about the one hundred uses of Pixy eyes, Harry was contemplating bed. It was at this time that Ethan returned. "Everything go alright?" asked Harry.

"Yeah. I'm off to London tomorrow, gotta buy a few things."

"London?"

"Yeah, I didn't bring much over from the states; I have to buy some clothes and the like." Harry nodded. "Where are Ron and Hermione?"

"Gone to bed. I was just finishing up some Potions work," Harry sighed, looking back down to the essay.

"Potions, huh." Harry nodded again, but now he saw the look on Ethan's face. A sort of desperate, apprehensive look. He sighed. "Just ask what you want to ask, Ethan...."

Rafe remained impassive. He sat down opposite Harry before speaking. He had wanted to ask these questions his entire life, but never had the chance to. And now the bloke who could answer them was sitting right in front of him. "You were there when he was resurrected?"

Harry realised where this was going instantly. "Yes."

"You duelled with him?" Ethan said shakily.

"Yes," Harry answered instantly again.

"How'd that feel?"

"I was scared shitless."

Rafe seemed taken back by this. Harry could see him thinking about his next question. Ethan practically whispered it. "What does he look like?"

Now it was Harry's turn to think before answering. *What did Voldemort look like? Well he wouldn't win Witch Weekly's Most-Charming Smile Award....* Harry decided on the obvious. "He looks like... evil. His face is snake like, slits where a nose should be. He's practically a skeleton of a man. Long, thin and bony." Harry shuddered, and then sighed.

"It's his eyes that get you. There not human, not that much else of him is either. But the eyes... red, merciless eyes. Like a demons...." Harry grew silent and closed his own eyes, picturing his mortal enemy clearly. "Is that all, Ethan?"

Ethan swallowed and then rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand. "Can you show me where I sleep?"

Harry nodded. "Come on, up the stairs and second door on the left." Rafe followed Harry up the stairs and entered the second door on the left.

Upon entering Harry saw that, sometime during the day, an extra bed had been brought up and placed against the back wall. Ron was fast asleep as Harry walked past him and the beds holding the other lads in the room. "This is probably yours, Ethan. That your trunk there," said Harry pointing towards the trunk at the base of the bed.

Ethan nodded, and then made ready to go to bed. He pulled his jumper over his head and was just about to remove it completely when he remembered something. The Dark Mark. *Potter couldn't see that, hard time explaining that one away.* Rafe put his jumper back on. If Harry ever saw it... well, he'd cross that bridge when he came to it. "Night, Harry," said Rafe.

Harry said goodnight and went back down to the common room. It was getting on a bit now, and there were only a few Gryffindors left up. Harry didn't really know any of them that well. A group of first years he didn't even know the names of. He put names to a few faces, but that was it. He moved back over to the table where he had been doing his Potions work. Deciding he'd probably get it done late Monday night before Potions the next day, he packed his things away into his bag and went to sit by the fire.

Harry sat gazing into the flickering flames as the common room emptied around him. He hadn't had a decent night's sleep in weeks, and had no reason to think tonight would be any different. Nightmares of the dead or of a huge glowing white circle were all he had when he was asleep. Not for the first time and definitely not for the last time, Harry found himself thinking about the prophecy. The prophecy that had doomed his life to

be one of misery since birth. He kept going over it in his head, hoping to find some loop hole, something overlooked... but of course there was nothing. Harry tried to find new ways to look at certain parts of the prophecy, to make it look better than it was, less painful. But there was one part that was clear as day, that could not be changed, that meant exactly what it said:

...and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives...

At the hand of the other, thought Harry. Kill or be killed. No matter which way Harry looked at it, this was murder, one way or the other. He thought of the Death Eater's who had died in the broom chase flight to Hogwarts. His spells had caused some of those deaths, but it wasn't the same. He hadn't wanted to kill then, it was self defence. But the prophecy... He would have to fight with the intention to kill when the final battle came. No self defence. He would meet Voldemort, and only one of them will leave alive. *Could I do it? Even if it is Voldemort, could I kill? The heir of Gryffindor versus the heir of Slytherin. That's ironic* he thought *Gryffindor verse Slytherin all the time at this school, he would do it again, but on a much larger scale....*

As Harry stared into the dying flames of the fire, he felt his eyelids slowly closing. The flickering flames were hypnotic and soon enough, Harry had fallen asleep.

He was flying. There was no broom, nothing holding him up. Harry felt himself soar through the night sky. He felt the wind in his hair, against his face. This was what flying was meant to be like.

Harry saw the ground beneath him. Now that he thought about it, was the ground moving or was he? He couldn't tell. He flew over rivers, great grassy plains, mountains, cities, fields. But it only took a few seconds. Harry saw a hilltop in the distance. Without knowing why, he was on top of it in an instant.

There was no light, everything was dark and quiet. He couldn't even make out the shapes of things around him. Harry looked around himself, this hilltop commanded an impressive view for dozens of miles around. Harry could see several cities dotted around the land. It appeared this

hilltop was in the centre of the land, and the cities were built all around it. Harry saw cities he knew and cities he didn't. London, Manchester, Paris, Washington... There were many more.

Suddenly, instantly, there was a massive explosion of light in the distance. A huge wall of fire covered Harry's vision. It was huge... fire. The explosion ripped across the land around him, levelling cities, leaving a trail of ash and destruction in its wake. Nothing survived. The cities with the tall skyscrapers were raised to the ground. It was the end of the world, and Harry hadn't even blinked.

He turned away from the destruction, and looked behind him. There it was; the circle of light. It swirled and around the edges small crackles of white light escaped and then disappeared. But it was what was in the centre of the circle that drew Harry's gaze. A thousand images flicked by in quick succession. Landscapes of cities, fields, rivers, and mountains; all changing. Some of them showed death, others life.

The circle grew until it was all that Harry could see. It was set to consume him, envelope him in its bright white light. It was getting closer and hotter. Harry found it hard to breath, he felt his very blood boiling from the intense heat in his veins, he was on fire, but there were no flames. And then he felt it sucking him in. Against his will he felt his feet leave the ground and up towards the circle. He was about to-

"HARRY! HARRY! WAKE UP," shouted a familiar voice.

Harry was jolted back to consciousness and saw a figure standing over him. Immediately instinct took over, instinct Harry didn't even know he had. Without realising what he was doing he grabbed this person by the throat and called Gryffindor's sword, his sword, from within him and stood up. All this happened in about two seconds.

It wasn't until Harry really saw this person, his hand on her throat and his other hand holding a blade in front of her face, that he realised who it was. "Hermione," he croaked, dropping back into the armchair, the sword disappearing as quickly as it had come.

"Hermione, I-"

Hermione had tears in her eyes; she raised her hand to her throat and rubbed it. Harry had squeezed hard. She tried to say something but nothing came out. She couldn't believe what had just happened. *Where had that sword come from? Why was he screaming in his sleep? That look in his eyes... his green eyes, were red.... just a flash and then it was gone....*

"Hermione, I'm sorry. I didn't- I didn't realise... Are you okay....?" Harry saw the look of fear on her face, a look that was directed towards him. Hermione was afraid of him. That wasn't right.

After what seemed like hours, Hermione spoke. "Harry, I... I think I deserve an explanation," she whispered, her hand never leaving her throat.

Harry was close to tears, he'd hurt her. "Do you- do you want to sit down?" Hermione nodded and sat in the armchair opposite Harry, not the one next to him. "I am so sorry," he whispered. "I didn't realise what I was doing. I would never hurt you, Hermione."

Hermione heard the sincerity in his voice, but she needed to see it in his eyes. Needed to see the normal Harry eyes. She looked up into those eyes and saw... clear emerald green.

It was Harry, the Harry she knew. "Harry, I know that. It's just...."

"What?"

"You scared me. I came down here and found you in that chair, you were screaming and shaking. I ran over and grabbed you, tried to wake you up but I couldn't hold you. You were so hot; I mean your skin was burning as if you were on fire." Hermione was near tears, Harry could tell. "I tried calling your name, and was just about to go get help when- when you woke up and... grabbed my throat," she finished weakly.

"I was... dreaming. It wasn't a nice dream; I don't want you to hear it...."

Harry thought she looked angry now, upset maybe? "Harry," she began quietly, "you've been keeping a lot of things from us lately. And I think I deserve an explanation. You don't seem well, Harry. You- you barely sleep, and when you do you have nightmares. Ron's told me about them,

he say's it's the same every night. And now I come down here because I heard you screaming and you grab me and threaten me with a sword.... You have to tell me what's going on?"

Harry sighed. Everything she said was true. She did deserve an explanation, he could have really hurt her, she had to know. "Hermione, do you remember when I received that recruitment letter from Voldemort a few weeks back?"

"Of course."

"Well... I didn't tell you everything that happened after Dumbledore and I left...."

"What happened?"

"Oh, it's nothing bad; in fact it was some good news for once. I don't really know how to say this so I'll just say it. I'm the heir of Gryffindor."

Hermione smiled as if she was going to laugh, but then she saw the look of seriousness on Harry's face and immediately took on a confused expression. "You're serious?" Harry nodded. "Well that explains one or two things. And... The sword?"

Harry smiled and raised his left arm. He called for the sword and in an instant it was in his hand. "Comes with the title; Gryffindor's heir, Gryffindor's sword."

He passed the sword to Hermione who carefully grabbed the hilt and ran her fingers up the length of the blade. "This is what you killed the basilisk with, wasn't it?" Harry nodded. "And it's *in* your arm?"

"I don't understand it either. But it's always there when I call for it." Harry raised his arm again, and the sword vanished in Hermione's hands and reappeared in his. He put it away.

"I am sorry, Hermione...."

"Its okay, Harry. I- I startled you, and... What were you dreaming about?"

Harry sighed. "Death...."

Hermione was silent for a moment. "You want to talk about it?"

"Nah... Come on, let's go get some breakfast."

Hermione smiled. "Harry, it's three in the morning."

"Oh..." Harry looked out of the nearby window, darkness. But he was still unexplainably hungry. "That shouldn't stop us; kitchens here are a twenty four hour service. Sit tight, I'll be back in a minute." Leaving a very bemused looking Hermione by the fire, Harry rushed up the stone stairs and into his room. Two minutes later he was back in the common room with his invisibility cloak. "Right, ready?"

"Harry, it's really late."

"No it isn't, it's really early. Come on, I know I won't get back to sleep tonight; I doubt you will now either. Let's go see Dobby. I'm sure we can avoid Filch," ended Harry nervously.

Hermione agreed and smiled. "Well it's nice to see your still 'Harry' sometimes, Harry."

"Er... what?"

"You can duel with a Dark Lord, face down dozens of dementors, and evade Death Eaters on a broom stick, yet you still get nervous when it comes to dodging Filch in the halls. It's just nice to see some of the old Harry."

"You don't like new Harry?"

"New Harry is way too serious."

Harry sighed. "I am sorry, Hermione."

"Oh, come on now, forget about that. I forgive you. Now let's go see Dobby."

"Harry Potter, sir!" cried a very excited looking Dobby, throwing his arms around Harry's left leg, knocking off a few very familiar looking hats in the process. "You have come to see, Dobby?"

Harry smiled. "Hello, Dobby."

"And you bring Miss Hermione to see Dobby as well."

Hermione smiled but she had a confused expression on her face.

"Dobby, are you wearing *all* my-"

Harry quickly intervened. "So, Dobby. I don't suppose there's any chance of getting something to eat?"

"Why yes, Harry Potter. We is just beginning to prepare the breakfast now."

Four small elves rushed over to Harry and Hermione carrying plates of food. Harry accepted them with many a 'thank you' and saw the little elves run off with smiles all over their faces. Harry and Hermione sat down next to Dobby and began to eat some sausages.

"How have you been, Dobby?"

"I has been fine, Harry Potter. I has thirteen new socks," said the elf pointing to his feet. He was wearing them all.

"That's nice, Dobby," said Hermione.

Their conversation went on like this for another half an hour; it always seemed to be drawn back to Dobby's socks however. After saying their goodbyes to Dobby and declining the plates of food the elves offered them on their way out, Harry and Hermione left. The walk back up to the tower was uneventful and soon enough they were slumped back in the armchairs by the fire.

It was a good three hours or so before the day started, and Harry was at a loss for something to do. He spotted his bag and pulled out the previous night's homework. With a small smile to Hermione, he was soon getting all the help he needed and had it finished in no time.

"Thanks, Hermione. Would've taken me hours." Later on that morning, at breakfast, Harry told Ron about his being the heir of Gryffindor. He left out the part about what happened for him to tell Hermione, but Ron's response was typical.

"Bloody hell, Harry. I bet that was a kick in the teeth! Did you hear that,

Hermione?"

"Yes, it is rather amazing isn't it? What with You-Know-Who being Slytherin's heir."

"Hey, I hadn't thought of that," said Ron. "You really have a sword in your arm, Harry?"

Harry nodded. "I'll show you later. Only you two and Dumbledore know about it so keep it quiet."

Ron and Hermione nodded. "Do you know where Ethan is, Harry?" asked Hermione.

"Hmm? Oh, he's gone to London. Said he needed to buy some things."

The weekend passed in a blur. Harry, Ron and Hermione spent the rest of Saturday down

by the lake. They talked about meaningless things and Harry showed Ron his sword. After a few hours the wind started to pick up and the rain clouds moved in, so the three of them went back up to Gryffindor tower.

As usual, Harry was up early the next day. He showered and walked down to the common room, all before seven. As he was descending the stairs, he heard the portrait of the fat lady open and close and then the footsteps of someone walking across the room. Harry continued down the stairs and came face to face with Ethan. He was carrying a few bags.

"Harry?"

"Ethan, you just get in?"

"Yeah... spent the night in London."

"Oh, well you didn't miss much here," said Harry. "I was just about to go down to breakfast, if you want to go?"

Rafe nodded and quickly jumped up the stairs and placed his bags in his trunk. Ten minutes later Harry and Ethan were seated in the Great Hall. Looking up at the ceiling, Harry saw that the day promised rain. Big grey rain clouds swirled across the entire sky. It was getting closer to

Christmas. The snow would come soon.

Pulling a plate of bacon towards himself, Harry talked to Ethan. "You ever played Quidditch, Ethan?" he asked.

Ethan seemed to think before answering. "Well... I have played some street Quidditch. Which is pretty much just violence on a broomstick. I broke my nose once or twice playing that back in the states. Its how I got this scar," he said, pointing to the crescent shaped scar on the left side of his slightly irregular nose.

"Well we've got Quidditch tryouts on the fifth, next Saturday, for the house team. You should come along. No one else in the house has had much experience."

"What positions are open?" he asked.

"Beater and Chaser."

Rafe seemed lost in thought for a moment but then he perked up. "I'll be there," he said getting up and beginning to walk away.

"Hey, where are you going?"

"Well I have to go buy a broom stick; I'll be back in an hour or two."

"Broom...? Where are you going to get that?"

Rafe thought for a moment. "Diagon Alley, is it called that? I can't remember?"

"You won't get there and back within two hours; someone might notice you're gone."

"It's all right. I'll just walk down to the gates and then Apparate-"

"Apparate!" whispered Harry, mindful of the other people now in the hall. "You can Apparate!"

Ethan smiled. "Don't tell anyone."

"But it's illegal until you're of age."

Rafe thought for a moment. He remembered Dumbledore asking him if he could teach

Potter one or two things. "I'll teach you how to do it, if you like?"

Harry was taken back by this. "I don't know..."

Rafe sat back down, as did Harry. "Look," he whispered, "from what I've heard you could really need this one day. Better to be safe than sorry."

Harry laughed. "Yeah, we'll be sorry when we're up on trial at the Ministry of Magic for breaking the law. Plus I don't like the idea of getting *splined*."

"What the Ministry doesn't know can't hurt them. And I learnt to Apparate on my own. I didn't splinch myself once. What do you say?"

Harry thought about this. He could have used Apparation many times over the years, many, many times. It would definitely be valuable against Voldemort and the Death Eater's. It was his job to defeat Voldemort, end a war. When... if he destroyed Voldemort the Ministry wouldn't care that he broke a few rules along the way. "All right."

Ethan nodded. "Good. Now if you'll excuse me, I've got to go buy a broom." And with that he left, leaving Harry to think about what just happened.

As promised he was back in a few hours. Harry, Ron and Hermione were sitting in the common room, as the rain was coming down in torrents outside every one was in the common room, when the portrait opened and in walked a drenched looking figure with a package slung over his shoulder. It was Ethan.

Every Gryffindor in the common room turned towards him, wondering why he would have been out in the rain. He spotted Harry and walked over. "Hello, you three," he said.

"Ethan, you're all wet. Where've you been?" asked Hermione.

"Em... I just got back from London."

"Well here," she said, quickly removing her wand from her robes. She

cast a drying spell.

"Thanks."

The rest of that day was spent indoors, as the rain ceased to let up. It was an ordinary day. Harry played chess with Ron, did some homework, and began planning his next DA lesson. He'd been somewhat lax with them of late, having one every other week. He thought it time to get back into the swing of things. And later that night, Harry had a whispered conversation with Ethan about Apparation.

"When do you want to start?" asked Ethan.

"As soon as possible. But I don't know where we could do it. You can't Apparate at Hogwarts."

"Well there has got to be a way to get off the grounds unnoticed. You've been here six years, what can you tell me?"

Harry thought about this. He could tell Ethan about the.... Harry didn't know why, but something told him to trust Rafe. "There is a way to get into Hogsmeade. A tunnel that leads into Honeydukes. There is also a tunnel that leads to a shack on the outskirts of the town, that shack is deserted."

Rafe nodded. "The shack it is. We'll go next weekend."

The next day was Monday, and again the beginning of the week gloom was on everybody in the Great Hall. Everybody that is, except for Hermione, who always looked forward to a new week.

"We have our first lesson with Moody today," she said happily to Ron as they sat down at the table.

"Well if he does things like the fake one did it should be interesting."

"Constant vigilance," muttered Harry.

Hermione laughed, as did Ron. "Did you see the notice on the board this morning, Harry?" asked Ron. Harry shook his head. "Hogsmeade weekend on Saturday the 26th."

"Should be good. If it isn't raining," he said looking up at the ceiling and seeing nothing but rain clouds, threatening to burst at any minute. As Harry watched the ceiling the post owls descended upon the Great Hall.

The dozens of owls circled the Hall, searching out their recipients. A rather impressive looking owl landed on Harry's shoulder. Harry removed the envelope attached to its leg and it took flight.

Harry looked at the envelope. *From the Office of the Minister of Magic.* Harry knew what this was, the details on his Order of Merlin award. Harry opened the letter and removed the parchment within.

"Who's that from?" asked Ethan.

"Cornelius Fudge," said Harry, "the Minister of Magic." Harry unfolded the parchment and read the letter.

Dear Mr. Potter,

Please be aware that the award ceremony for your Order of Merlin, Second Class, will be held on November the 16th 1996, at the Ministry of Magic Formal Events Hall.

Please find enclosed your itinerary:

18:00: A car will be waiting for you at The Leaky Cauldron to take you to the venue.

18:30: Arrive at the Ministry of Magic Formal Events Hall, meet with Ministry Officials

19:00 till end: Dinner and dancing before the awarding of the Order of Merlin, Second Class.

Please note formal dress robes are required, as is a partner for the dance. Thank you, Mr. Potter.

Sincerely,

Cornelius Fudge

Minister of Magic

"Well there you go then," said Harry passing the letter to Ron.

"That should be fun," said Ron passing the letter to Hermione.

"Yeah.... great. Come on, we have to get to Transfiguration."

Transfiguration passed in a blur of normality, and soon enough Harry found himself walking down to Hagrid's hut for Magical Creatures. Hagrid had told them that his 'special delivery' was due mid-November. Until then it was Krups.

As was the routine, Harry found Padma and they went and got Little Harry. From there they followed a path around the lake and sat near its edge while Little Harry ventured a few feet into the water. They were there now.

"Harry, you're Hagrid's friend. Do you know what his 'special delivery' is?" asked Padma.

Harry sighed. "No, he won't tell me. I've asked him about a hundred times."

"Oh well, I suppose we'll see in time."

"Yeah...." Harry had become nervous. He had wanted to ask Padma to the award ceremony. The letter said to bring a partner, and he couldn't think of anyone else he'd rather go with. *Come on, man* he thought to himself; *you're a Gryffindor. Hell, you're Gryffindor's heir. You should be brave enough to do this....* "Listen, Padma. I was wondering if," Harry decided on aiming smaller first, "if you'd like to go to Hogsmeade with me...?"

Padma seemed taken back by this. But then she smiled. "Oh, Harry. I'd love to."

Harry smiled, somewhat stupidly, and stood up. "Really?"

Padma stood up to. "I was actually working up the courage to ask you."

"You were?" smiled Harry.

Padma nodded and placed her hand in Harry's. The two of them walked

back to Hagrid's like that, attracting one or two looks from their classmates.

At lunch Harry told Ron and Hermione about Padma. They were happy for him.

Hermione personally thought it was about time something good happened for him. God knows he's had enough bad luck over the past few months. After lunch was there first DADA lesson with Moody, the real Moody hopefully.

Harry walked up to DADA room 2 with Ron, Hermione and Ethan. Upon entering the room, they discovered they weren't the first ones there. Padma was there, as was her group of friends. She called Harry over and he sat down next to her. Ethan sat to Harry's right, followed by Hermione and then Ron. Harry made small talk with Padma as the room filled up around them.

After five minutes or so, the dull clunk of Moody's leg on the stone floor could be heard approaching the room and everyone grew quiet. When Moody entered he didn't say anything. He walked passed the rows of silent students and sat at his own desk. For a few minutes he said nothing, his magical blue eye jumping from student to student.

Eventually he spoke. "Good afternoon," he said.

Most people muttered a greeting back, but Moody was already on his feet. "You were learning wandless magic from Dumbledore?" he asked. Several people nodded. "Very handy area that," he growled. "But I'm not going to continue with that lesson plan. You will still practice your wandless magic, as it will appear on NEWTs, but you will do it for homework, twenty minutes a night." Moody stopped and swirled his eye across the room, daring anyone to question his homework. No one did. "Good... Now that that's out of the way, I'll move on to the new course. I am here to teach you Defence Against the Dark Arts. This term you will be learning to properly defend yourself against dark wizards."

Harry realised where this was going. The same way he had taken DA meetings. They were here to learn how to fight Death Eaters. Moody continued. "Most of you are aware of the return of Voldemort." Almost

everybody in the room jumped or cringed at the sound of the name, Moody continued. "You will soon be of age and with that comes responsibility... and choice. This war with the Dark Lord will be fought by you; your choices will decide the outcome of this war. Join the Death Eater's or become an Auror? Fight or die? Resist or serve? In the end it will be down to you, I hope you will make the right choice when the time comes."

Moody let these words sink in. It was a good three minutes before he spoke again. "Now, can anyone tell me what Voldemort's greatest weapon is?"

Several people raised their hands. Moody nodded to them one by one.

"The killing curse."

"Cruciatius."

"The Dementors."

"Death Eater's."

"Those answers," said Moody, "are all wrong. Anyone else want to take a stab at it?"

Moody's gaze shifted over Harry's for just a second.

Harry sighed. He knew the answer; he was probably the only one in the room who did.

"Fear," he said quietly. Everybody heard him.

"Good," said Moody. "It's good to see at least one of you has his wits about him. Fear! Fear is Voldemort's biggest weapon. I say his name and most of you instinctively flinch or gasp. Yet none of you, bar Potter, have ever even seen Voldemort. You have no idea what you are afraid of, what we are fighting against. But still you fear him. And what's more he knows it." Moody grew silent and let them think about these words. "I only know a handful of wizards on this *entire* planet that will say Voldemort's name, myself included. That's literally half a dozen out of about a billion wizards. One of them is in this room, another you call

headmaster."

Everyone's gaze shifted to Harry's. He moved uncomfortably in his seat. "Well, fear of a name only increases fear of the thing itself," said Harry remembering Dumbledore's words from his first year.

"EXACTLY," shouted Moody. Everyone in the room jumped. "By fearing to say his name you are adding to his power. Voldemort *is* an extremely powerful wizard. By his wand hundreds, if not thousands, have died. But his real power comes from those who support him. The Death Eater's, Voldemort's army. They're the ones that usually do his dirty work; Voldemort himself only kills those who have really annoyed him. And that's why I am going to teach you to fight Death Eater's. Curses, hexes and protective charms. You will learn and remember it all. Don't think you're safe. Voldemort is out there. He will affect every one of you in some way before this war is over, I guarantee it. Now I know most of you haven't had much experience with this sort of thing, so let's hear from someone who has. Potter, what's it like to duel with the Dark Lord?"

Harry was silent as every person in the room turned to face him. He thought for a moment. *What was duelling with Voldemort like? Well...* "It's like knowing you're about to die and can do absolutely nothing to stop it. He'll play with you, ask you questions, tell you to do things; *bow to death*, things like that. He will use fear to break you... and pain. After Avada Kedavra, Cruciatus is probably his favourite curse... that one hurts...." Padma grasped his hand under the desk. "He likes to put on a good show...."

Moody nodded. "And the Death Eaters...?"

"The Death Eaters are mostly brawn, not brain. If you know how to protect yourself, they shouldn't be too much of a problem... though they do like to work in groups," he said remembering the Death Eaters from the Department of Mysteries.

"Thank you, Potter," said Moody. "Now, pull out your quills and copy this down." Moody waved his wand towards the black board and lines of chalk whirled their way across it, forming words.

Stonehenge, the night of October 2nd

"My Lord," said one of the two Death Eaters that had just approached Voldemort, the two men were carrying something between them.

"What is it?" said Voldemort angrily.

The men threw forward the burden they had been carrying. It was a man, stunned.

"We found him on the outskirts of that line of trees," said the Death Eater pointing to some trees in the distance. "I think he's an Auror."

"You're not here to think," said Voldemort. "You may go."

The two men bowed to Voldemort and then disappeared into the darkness around the stones. Voldemort surveyed the man before him while he removed his wand from within his robes. He didn't recognise him. "Enervate," he said lazily.

The man woke up and instinctively reached for his wand in a holster around his waist. It wasn't there. "You have had Auror training I see," said Voldemort. The man jumped and looked up at the Dark Lord.

"You- You're.... He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named...." stuttered the man, his voice shaking with fear.

"Yes, Auror, I am. Would you mind telling me what you were doing here?" The man passed his hand over his eyes and muttered something incoherently. "I've already asked you once. Do not make me ask again!"

"I- I...."

"Crucio."

The Auror screamed and wreathed in pain on the cold ground. After a minute, Voldemort broke the connection. "Well?"

The man began to cry. "I was... I was... spying...."

"I know you were, Auror. And now you must pay the price."

"N- No," he cried.

"Wormtail," shouted Voldemort into the darkness around him.

Peter Pettigrew emerged to Voldemort's right and slowly moved towards his master.

"Yes, my Lord?"

"Tie this spy to the altar, and place these two daggers either side of him," said Voldemort with a quick flick of his wrist, two knives appeared in his hand. He passed them to Wormtail.

Wormtail didn't say anything as he tied the man to the stone altar in the centre of the circle, he didn't look at the man as he continued to cry, and he didn't look at the man as he placed a dagger either side of him.

"Good, Wormtail. Now come hold this book open, I will need my hands free."

Wormtail obeyed. He kneeled down in front of Voldemort and held the ancient book up so the Dark Lord could read it. "This ritual requires sacrifice," he said to himself.

Voldemort began. He spoke in a tongue Wormtail was unfamiliar with. He thought it might be a language similar to Latin, but not quite so. Voldemort began to speak louder. At first Wormtail thought he was imagining it; one of the stones that made up the circle began to glow. It was followed by another and then another. Three stones on three different points of the circle, all glowing light blue.

Voldemort raised his left arm and the dagger to the left of the Auror rose with it. With one swift movement Voldemort brought his arm plunging down, causing the dagger to do the same. It punctured the left side of the Auror's chest and penetrated deep. The man screamed in pain but was drowned out by the sound of the wind now blowing through the circle. Wormtail watched as the glowing stones shot beams of light above the centre altar. They met in the middle and began to spin above the man, forming an orb of dark blue light that was suspended above this Auror who was screaming in pain.

Voldemort began to chant even louder now, and in so doing raised his right arm. The dagger to the right of the man rose with it. The orb that hung above the man was now about the size of his head. Without

warning, Voldemort brought his arm down, causing the dagger to fall into the man's chest. He screamed out again and then began to take deep desperate breaths. He was dying... slowly.

His vision was becoming blurry. He hardly saw what was in front of him anymore. Instead he saw images of his life flick by. He saw his wife when they were married, god she was beautiful. He saw his daughter; she would be going to Hogwarts in a year. And then his vision came back to him for a brief moment, and through the pain he saw Voldemort raise his arms.

Voldemort raised his arms. He shouted a few final words and then brought them crashing down. The orb of light swirled for a moment before plummeting towards the man. He saw it coming; it was the last thing he ever saw. The orb connected with him, and his chest exploded. Pieces of his flesh were thrown outwards for metres around. Voldemort didn't move as his robes were splattered with blood, nor did he move as the smoke cleared.

Wormtail was still kneeling on the ground, the book and his robes covered in the man's blood. He rose when Voldemort ordered him to. Instinctively Wormtail turned to the altar. What met his eyes wasn't pretty. Chunks of the man's flesh still littered the stone. Unrecognisable pieces here and there lay strewn across the glade. It was a blood bath. Wormtail turned away as his eyes connected with the mans severed head lying at the base of the altar, the biggest piece of him left.

Voldemort ignored the carnage before him, he ignored Wormtail's whimpers. He was looking for any sign of magic, words maybe, written into the stone like it had happened last time. And then they became clear. Red letters appeared on in the stone, as did a small hieroglyph. Voldemort read them:

Tempus ac Capacitas

"Tempus ac Capacitas.... Time and Space," he muttered. Voldemort studied the small hieroglyph that had also appeared. It depicted the Sun and Moon in the sky together, over three dark lines. Voldemort knew what this was, the Vernal Equinox. One of the longest days in the year when there was exactly twelve hours of daylight and sunlight. The three

lines meant that it would be in the third month, March, as it always was. March 20th 1997 would be the next one. Voldemort assumed that this time and space magic could only be performed on this day. Beyond that he didn't know what it would do.

Voldemort turned away from the stone. He would definitely look into this more. As he was walking away he spoke to Wormtail. "Put the spy's head in a box; send it to that fool Dumbledore. Show him once more what happens to enemies of Lord Voldemort."

Saturday October 5th

Harry stared warily at the ceiling in the Great Hall. Today was the day of the Quidditch tryouts. He didn't want to have to do it in the rain. From what he could tell, not many people were trying out for the team. The only people he saw carrying brooms were Ethan, Ginny, and a few other people from the lower years.

After breakfast Harry walked down to the pitch alone. He carried his Firebolt slung over his shoulder. He hadn't been on it since the beginning of term, when he crashed through the window and was itching to get back in the air. He arrived at the Quidditch pitch to discover he was the first one there.

Harry walked out onto the finely cut grass and swung his leg over his broom. With a quick glance up at the sky, he kicked off with all the force he had. Nothing else existed for Harry now, while flying he forgot all his problems and just soared. Back and forth across the pitch he flew. He felt the wind in his hair as he dived towards the ground.

When he was in mere inches of it, Harry pulled up sharply on his broom and felt the adrenaline flow through him. That was fun.

Harry flew slower now; he slowly made his way up and across the stands and dismounted his broom up in one of the boxes. He sat down lazily on one of the wooden benches, his thoughts invading his mind again now that he wasn't flying. He closed his eyes and sat back. For the thousandth time that week, Harry thought of the Prophecy, *at the hand of the other... It won't be me, I will kill him.* His thoughts were interrupted as he heard some footsteps to his left. Harry sat up and opened his eyes. It

was Ginny.

"Hello, Harry," she said.

"Hi, Gin. You here for the tryouts?"

"Yes, I'm going to try for Chaser."

Harry nodded. "I'm sure you'll do well."

Ginny smiled. "Thanks, Harry." She continued to smile for a moment but then seemed lost in her thoughts. "Harry," she said quietly, "do you know anything about that new boy, Ethan?"

"Ethan? Not much, why?"

"Oh! No, it's nothing really... just...."

"What?"

"Well, he kind of reminds me of someone."

Harry had thought the same thing upon first meeting Rafe. "Who?"

"I'm not sure," she said shaking her head. "But when I look at him I just get this feeling, and it's not a good feeling... I was afraid when I first saw him and I don't know why?"

Harry sighed. "It's probably nothing...." Though Harry wasn't sure, he didn't really know Ethan.

Harry was brought back to his senses as other people started to arrive. Down below on the pitch he caught sight of Katie Bell, Ethan, Ron, Seamus, Dean, Colin Creevey, Dennis Creevey, Lavender Brown and about half a dozen third and fourth years. Harry and Ginny mounted their brooms and flew down to meet them.

"There you are, Harry," said Ron when Harry landed next to him. "We missed you at breakfast."

"I wanted to get out and fly for a bit," he said.

"Right," began Katie, "thanks for coming out. Could I please have one

line to my left for those of you who are here to tryout for the Chaser positions, and a line to the right for

Beaters."

There was some shuffling as the lines were formed. In the Chaser line was Ginny, Seamus, Colin Creevey, Lavender Brown, and the half a dozen or so kids from the lower years. In the Beater line stood Ethan, Dean, and Dennis Creevey, who was practically dwarfed by the two sixth years next to him.

"Good," said Katie. "This is how it's going to work. The first two in the Chaser line will fly with me, while the first person in the Beater line will knock Bludgers at us, trying to stop us from getting up the field. Got it? Good. Harry, you and Ron will watch and judge who did the best."

Katie bent down to the box at her feet and opened it. Inside were the Quidditch balls.

"Okay, get ready. Ginny, Seamus, you're up first. You too, Dean." They mounted their brooms just as Katie released the Bludgers. Dean was off after them immediately. Katie grabbed the Quaffle and flew into the air, closely followed by Ginny and Seamus. "On three," she said. "One, two, three."

They were off. Katie, Ginny, and Seamus flew in line with each other, passing the Quaffle back and forth effortlessly. They were a quarter of the way up the pitch when Dean hit his first Bludger at them. It swooped behind Seamus and hit the tail of his broom, causing him to drop the Quaffle. Katie quickly recovered and passed it to Ginny, who successfully dodged a Bludger from Dean. She sped off up the pitch with all the speed she could muster. She was closing in on the hoop when a Bludger flew across her path and caused her to brake in mid-air. Katie zoomed past her, and as she did, Ginny threw her the Quaffle and she threw it through the middle hoop. It was over. Seamus hadn't done very well, but Ginny had. And Dean did all right with the Bludgers; at least that was what Harry thought.

Next up was Lavender and Colin Creevey, with Dennis Creevey on Bludgers. This one was over before it began. Katie, Lavender, and Colin

flew up the pitch without one Bludger getting in their way. Dennis had failed.

It was Ethan's turn next. Katie and two third years had a hard time making it up the pitch, as Ethan mercilessly hit Bludger after Bludger at them. Eventually they did get there. *Well that's the Beaters decided* thought Harry *Ethan and Dean*

Every Beater got another chance to show their worth as the other Chaser hopefuls were cycled through. Ethan was great, Dean was okay, and Dennis was terrible. After it was finished, Katie and the rest of the group approached Ron and Harry.

"The Beaters are definitely Dean and Ethan," said Harry. "Sorry, Dennis." Dennis nodded glumly.

"As for the Chasers," said Ron. "Well... Ginny you're in," he said. "But we couldn't decide between Colin and Lavender. You'll have to go again."

"Okay," said Katie. "Come on you two." Katie, Colin, and Lavender flew back into the air. "Ethan," shouted Katie, "you are the Beater."

Ethan mounted his broom (a Firebolt by the way) and flew into the air. They were off. Katie, Colin and Lavender started off good. They made it half way up the pitch before Ethan's barrage of Bludgers hit them. Lavender dropped the Quaffle, as did Katie, both trying to dodge Bludgers. But Colin, Colin dropped it five consecutive times as the two Bludgers came his way five consecutive times. By the end Colin had given up, handing the victory to Lavender.

"So that's final," said Katie. "The Chasers are Ginny and Lavender, and the Beaters Dean and Ethan. Thanks to all you others who tried out. Maybe next year for one of you. Okay, for those of you on the team I'll arrange some practices for next week. The first game is against Hufflepuff on the 23rd of November so we better be ready."

Harry, Ethan, and Ron stayed behind as everyone else left. They wanted to fly some more. Harry tried to get Ginny to stay but she shook her head slowly and cast a worried glance at Ethan. Harry noticed this and didn't push it. "Okay, see you later then."

After she left the three of them took flight. Ron was in goals while Harry and Ethan took shots on him. Harry thought that Ron had improved. *He must have been practicing over the summer* thought Harry. He saved at least nine out of every ten shots.

Harry was just about to get out the Snitch when the rain, that had been threatening all day, broke. There was a struggle as the three of them tried to run up the path carrying the Quidditch box and their brooms between them. Eventually they made it, and Harry dropped the box off at Madam Hooch's office before rushing down to lunch in the Great Hall.

On Monday they had DADA with Moody again. Just like with the fake Moody this was fast becoming everyone's favourite lesson.

"Good afternoon," growled Moody once they were all seated. "Today and everyday from now until I say so, will be a practical lesson." Most people in the room looked up at this, practical lessons were always fun. "Can anyone in this room honestly say that they have duelled, a proper duel, formal, one on one with another wizard? Raise your hand." Harry raised his hand, as did Ethan, Malfoy, and a Hufflepuff Harry couldn't remember the name of. "Well four out of sixty isn't bad," said Moody lightly. "By the end of the month everyone in the room will have duelled against someone. That's our next area of study. You're going to be duelling against eachother."

This was met with silence as people cast furtive glances at each other. *Duelling* thought Harry *should be fun*.

"Now this is not meant to be fun," barked Moody. "This is so you know how to protect yourself when the time comes. Now, we'll start today. Do we have a volunteer pair to go first?" No one volunteered. "Come on people, don't make me choose." Still no one volunteered. "All right then...." sighed Moody. "Let's see... Potter," Harry stood up, "and...." Before Moody could select a second Ethan stood up. Moody looked at Rafe apprehensively before speaking. "Okay... Rafe and Potter."

Harry and Ethan moved out into the big empty space in the middle of the room. For a brief moment Harry realised that this big empty space would be just for this, duelling. Harry and Rafe separated and then turned to face eachother. "Right, I'm sure I don't need to tell you which curses not

to use," said Moody. They nodded. "Okay. The winner will be the one who immobilises the other. That is, puts them at your mercy. Begin!"

For a moment Harry and Ethan didn't move, and then at the same time they bowed to each other. Harry couldn't help but be reminded of his duel with Voldemort in the graveyard. *Bow to Death...* Rafe was quick to get on the offensive. "STUPEFY," he shouted. Harry threw himself to the floor and the curse went over him. It flew towards the row of desks on the right side of the room, currently occupied by one third of the class.

They ducked and the curse hit the stone wall behind them.

Harry was quick to get back on his feet. As soon as he was, he fired the first curse that came to his mind. "Impedimenta." Ethan stepped to the side and dodged the curse easily. With a quick flick of his wand he shouted, "Expelliarmus!" This came at Harry faster than he could dodge. He took it in the chest and felt his wand leave his grasp as he was thrown backwards through the air. Harry landed hard on his back on the edge of the room, wandless.

Ethan was sure he'd won. Sure Potter was down and out. He strode casually over to Harry, wand hanging lazily at his side. That was his mistake. Quick as a flash Harry raised his arm and shouted, "Stupefy!" Wandless magic, Rafe hadn't expected it. He didn't have time to dodge, he was too close. The spell hit him and he fell to the floor unconscious.

"Well done, Potter," growled Moody. "Revive him now."

Harry retrieved his wand and revived Ethan. He blinked a bit before noticing Harry.

"Didn't expect that one," he said. Harry grabbed his arm and helped him to his feet.

"That was good, lads," said Moody. "Go sit back down." Harry and Rafe returned to their seats. "Now, can anyone tell me what Ethan's mistake was? Where he went wrong?" Hermione raised her hand. "Granger."

"He dropped his guard once he had Harry's wand," said Hermione. "Didn't expect Harry to be able to retaliate without a wand."

"Right," barked Moody. "NEVER, and I mean never, let your guard down in the presence of an enemy. I've seen too many men cut down because they thought they had won. Never take your eye off the ball."

The week seemed to fly by for Harry. He was kept busy in Potions by Snape. It took Harry all to keep going in that class without hitting Snape. When it came to DADA, Harry barely had time to breathe. Moody insisted that they duel as fast as they could. Once one pair duelled another would immediately take their place. Harry had yet to duel against Ron or Hermione, which was a good thing, and hadn't duelled against Malfoy, which was a bad thing. Like Harry, Malfoy hadn't lost any of his duels; he wanted to wipe the smug grin off his face.

On Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday nights he had Quidditch practice to slog through. Katie wanted everyone to get used to playing with each other before the match against Hufflepuff. Harry had approached McGonagall after Transfiguration on Friday and asked about the griffin. McGonagall had yet to acquire a griffin so his animagus training was going nowhere fast.

As was his way, Harry was up early on Saturday morning. He hobbled out of bed and over the landing to the shower. After showering he made his way down to the common room. Harry had expected to be the only one up, so he was surprised to find Ethan sitting in an armchair, all showered and shaved.

"You ready, Harry?" he asked upon seeing him.

"Ready?" Harry was lost.

"I thought you wanted to learn how to Apparate?"

"Oh! Yeah. You want to go now?" Harry glanced out the window. The sun had barely risen yet. It was the early light of dawn that met his eyes.

"If we go now we could be back in a few hours, nobody would miss us."

Harry nodded. "All right, give me two minutes." Harry climbed back up the stairs and into the dorm. Being as quiet as he could, he removed the invisibility cloak from his trunk and silently left the room.

There was a cool wind blowing as Harry and Ethan made their way across the grounds under the invisibility cloak. They walked slowly towards the willow tree that held the tunnel to the Shrieking Shack. Once they arrived Harry picked up a fallen branch from the ground and prodded the knot that stayed the tree.

Harry and Ethan slid down the tunnel entrance and into the dark, dank tunnel itself.

"What is this place?" asked Ethan.

"This tunnel leads to a place called the Shrieking Shack; it's the deserted house on top of the hill just outside of Hogsmeade. It's outside of the Hogwarts Anti-Apparation wards."

Rafe nodded as they began to walk up the long tunnel. Harry and Ethan pulled out their wands and lit them as they went ahead. After walking for a while Harry saw the entrance to the shack. They entered it.

It was as Harry remembered it. Scruffy, claw marked furniture covered in a decades worth of dust. He and Ethan quickly made their way into the 'living room'. "Right, here we are. How do we start?" asked Harry.

Ethan sat in one of the old armchairs. It promptly collapsed inwards on itself. "Damn," said Ethan springing up from the destroyed chair. "All right let's get to it then." Harry watched as Ethan disappeared with a pop, and reappeared instantly on the other side of the room.

"Impressive," said Harry.

"Thanks. Okay, the first thing you need to know about Apparation is that it is not that hard once you get your mind around a few of the angles. You just saw me jump from one side of the room to the other. I knew where I was going. That is the basic rule in Apparation; always know where you are going. It won't work properly if you're not sure of the destination, and that can result in splinching."

Harry swallowed. Splinching wasn't nice. "So how do you... em... activate Apparation?"

"You have to visualise the place you want to be very clearly. Think of

every detail about that particular location that you can. See it clearly in your mind's eye."

"And then?"

"And then, if it's your first time, you pray you don't leave half of yourself behind." Ethan popped back over to Harry's side of the room. "For the first few times you apparate, you have to use your wand to cast the Apparation spell on yourself."

"But you don't always have to do that?"

"No, after you've done it enough times its just natural. You just have to think the spell and it will work without a wand. And, actually, that's the hardest part of Apparation, doing it without a wand."

Harry nodded. And then asked a question that had been bothering him. "How did you learn to Apparate, Ethan?"

"I taught myself last year. You can learn anything from a book, absolutely anything."

Harry laughed. "You should talk to Hermione about books, you hardly ever find her out of one."

Rafe nodded. "She's Muggle-born, isn't she?"

"What if she is," said Harry defensively.

"Don't get me wrong, Harry. I've got nothing against that. Magic is magic no matter who it belongs to. I just meant you've got a pretty powerful enemy whose whole basis for war is over the purity of blood. Don't you worry about her?"

Harry sighed. "All the time... I've seen to her safety at Hogwarts, though. Voldemort can't touch her here, or Ron."

"How...?"

"The Fidelius charm."

Rafe looked impressed. "That's some powerful magic. And very effective."

"Yeah... let's get back to Apparation." Rafe nodded. "How long did it take you to learn?"

Ethan shrugged. "Six weeks or so. It won't take you that long, though. Not with someone teaching you how to do it. I had to learn by trial and error, you I can guide through it correctly. Maybe three weeks to a month."

That would be good thought Harry *the sooner the better*. "Let's get to it then."

Chapter 7 - Loss of Innocence

So long as there are men there will be wars

--Albert Einstein

"Good, Rafe. Weasley, better luck next time," growled Moody. Ethan and Ron shook hands and went and sat back down, their duel over. "Next up is... Potter and... Malfoy," said Moody quickly scanning a list in front of him.

Harry smiled to himself; he'd been looking forward to this one. He strode into the centre of the room and watched Malfoy do the same. They stood close to each other, barely a metre apart. "When you're ready, lads," Moody said.

Harry and Malfoy didn't move. They hadn't talked once since the incident outside the Great Hall, when Rafe had hit him. "Scared, Potter," said Malfoy so only Harry could hear him.

Harry smiled. "How's your Dad doing, Malfoy," he said lightly.

"A lot better than yours," Malfoy whispered.

It took Harry is all not to drop his wand then and there and just attack Malfoy physically. The two of them bowed to one another, not very low.

And took five steps back, their eyes never leaving each other.

Malfoy attacked first. "Scorntalus!" he shouted. Harry jumped to the side, and in so doing, fell to the floor. He didn't know this curse, nor did he like the sound of it.

From the floor Harry shouted. "Stupefy!"

Malfoy dodged this easily, but Harry took this chance to get to his feet. "Expelliarmus," said Malfoy.

Harry ducked this time and the curse went over his head. He was quick to get back on the offensive. "Travesium." Malfoy threw himself to the ground to avoid this one.

Their duel went on like this for a while, none of their curses actually making contact. Harry used a few curses that he had been holding back on using against his friends. It appeared Malfoy had been saving a few just for him as well.

They circled the room, as Harry moved left, Malfoy moved right. As quick as a flash Malfoy raised his wand and shot a curse. Harry moved quickly to the left, but not fast enough. The curse grazed his cheek and he felt blood trickling down his face and onto his robes. Malfoy didn't stop. Almost as soon as he fired his first curse he fired a second. "Expelliarmus!" he shouted.

Harry was still reeling from the first curse; he didn't get out of the way in time. This one hit him full force in the shoulder. It was powerful, very powerful. Harry flew backwards through the air, somersaulting all the way, and landed hard on one of the desks near the back wall. He had also lost his wand.

Harry had had the wind knocked out of him. Struggling to breathe he looked to his left and caught side of Padma, he'd landed on her desk. "Hi..." he coughed. She smiled at him. Harry rolled off the desk and back on to his feet. He looked over at Malfoy and saw him pick up his wand and put it in his pocket. But Harry wasn't out yet, he still had his wandless magic.

"Give it up, Potter," sneered Malfoy. "Know when you're beaten."

"You can't make me give up that easily, Malfoy."

Malfoy laughed and raised his wand. "Stupefy!"

Harry didn't move. He saw the beam of red light shoot towards him and still he didn't move. At the last possible moment Harry raised his arms and shouted, "Protego!" The shield charm deflected Malfoy's curse and sent it back at him. He jumped out of the way just in time. There were many gasps from people around the room. Most of them could barely do the summoning charm without a wand, even Moody looked slightly impressed. Harry ignored them though, and as quick as a flash he tried to summon his wand from Malfoy's pocket, but Malfoy got a hand on it and stopped the wand from leaving his pocket.

From the ground Malfoy shot another stunning spell at Harry. His still active shield charm stopped that one too, but that was it for the shield, it broke under the second curse, leaving Harry defenceless. No sooner had the shield charm disappeared, than Harry was already on the move. In one swift movement he dived forward with his arms raised. "Travesium!"

Malfoy stepped to the side, but not quick enough. He took the spell in the chest and fell backwards to the floor. Malfoy began to roll around on the floor, hitting his robes with his hand here and there. It looked quite comical and Harry knew why. The Travesium curse is designed to make the victim believe he is on fire. It didn't cause any pain, but Malfoy would be able to see and feel the heat from the 'flames'.

Most people in the room, bar the Slytherins, were laughing at the sight of Malfoy rolling around on the ground, swatting at invisible flames. Harry walked casually over to Malfoy and removed his wand from his pocket. "WATERA," he said while laughing.

A torrent of water fell out of Harry's wand and drenched Malfoy from head to toe. He stopped rolling and looked up at Harry viciously. Harry spoke so only Malfoy could hear him. "And that is that, Malfoy." He made a move to go for his wand but Harry was faster. "Stupefy," he said quickly. Malfoy slumped to the floor, unconscious.

"Well done, Potter," growled Moody. "That wandless magic of yours is

the damndest thing I've ever seen. Revive him and then get yourself to the Hospital wing and have that cut looked at."

Harry nodded and quickly cast the Enervate spell on Malfoy. With a small nod to Hermione and Ron he left the room and made his way up to the Hospital wing. Despite the pain now swelling in his cheek, Harry couldn't help but smile, he had enjoyed that.

"One thing you should know about Apparation, is that it will go wrong if you think it will. You have to believe that you'll Apparate, that you'll get to where you're going successfully."

It was Saturday the 19th and Harry and Ethan stood in the Shrieking Shack. They had been here three times now, and Harry was getting the basics down. "What does it feel like?" asked Harry.

"Well... there is not really much time to feel anything, the trip is almost instantaneous. It's like blinking, a brief shadow of darkness before the world comes into focus."

"And how do you know it'll work before you try it?"

"The first time you have to take it on faith. Pray it happens. After that it's just like riding a broom, you never forget how to do it."

Harry nodded. "You said there was a spell that you have to use the first few times?"

"Apyraceus! Point your wand at yourself; see the place you want to be, believe that you'll get there and say that, Apyraceus."

"Apyraceus..." whispered Harry.

"You're not ready to try that yet. A few more lessons I think."

Harry nodded and picked up the cloak, it was time to get back to Hogwarts.

That Monday Harry had Magical Creatures, and as usual he found himself sitting by the lake with Padma, while Little Harry played by the water.

"I'm really looking forward to Saturday, Harry," said Padma with a smile.

"Me too," replied Harry quietly, looking out across the lake.

"Is everything all right, Harry?" she asked.

"Hmm? Oh... yeah. Yeah I'm fine, just thinking about a few things...."

Padma looked thoughtful for a moment. "You want to talk about something?" Harry didn't say anything; he just continued to stare into the lake. "Perhaps if we-"

"Have you ever known someone who's died, Padma?" cut in Harry quickly.

She had to think about this one. *No thought Padma I don't know Death like you do....* "No, Harry."

"My last remaining family died two months ago... Voldemort killed them...." Harry said remorsefully.

Padma instinctively twitched at the name. "I- I know...."

Harry looked up at this but turned away again. "I expect everyone does... That's life though, isn't it? Just one damned thing after another...."

"Harry, I-"

"My Godfather died a month before them... he was murdered too."

Padma was now confused. "Your godfather? Sirius... Sirius Black? But he was-"

"He was innocent," said Harry sadly. "He never killed anyone...." Padma nodded, though she was still confused. "Long story, don't worry about it...." ended Harry quietly.

"I think you need to talk about it, Harry."

Either Harry wasn't listening or he heard her and chose to ignore it. "What would you do, Padma, if you knew your entire existence was building up to one final event? One event that could decide whether you live or die? Whether anyone lives or dies...."

Padma was worried. She had never known Harry to be so open. She had never really known Harry at all until a month or so ago. And in the time she had known him, she saw that he was as everyone thought him to be, the tragic hero, the survivor of the killing curse, the boy who lived. And now here he was, giving her a glimpse into his painful life. "I don't know what I'd do, Harry."

Harry sighed. "Listen to me... rambling on like this. Lets talk about Hogsmeade, aye," he said trying to sound cheerful.

Padma could still see the shadow behind his eyes. He'd closed himself off again. "Okay... well what should we do on Saturday then?"

Harry looked thoughtful. "I don't know? To tell you the truth I've only ever taken a girl out once. And that was a disaster," he said remembering his one date with Cho Chang, now Head Girl.

"Well what would you like to do?"

"I do need to buy some formal dress robes." Harry remembered his Order of Merlin ceremony. "That's a thing? Would you like to come with me to this place I've got to go to?"

Padma looked confused and let out a small laugh. "I'd love to go... but what is it?"

Harry shrugged. "Ministry's giving me an Order of Merlin on the 16th next month. I guess I have to go along, being the recipient and all."

Padma could truly tell that he didn't care for this. One of the highest honours in the wizarding world and he just shrugged it off. It was amazing the way he saw some things that didn't matter to most people and just as easily dismissed things that would mean everything to someone else. "Sounds like fun."

That Saturday Harry made ready to go. He woke early, as was his way, showered and shaved before making his way down to the armchairs by the fire. Today was Hogsmeade day, and he couldn't help but feel that maybe he shouldn't be doing this, allowing another person to get too close. Padma was special to him, if she got hurt then-

"Morning, Harry," said a familiar voice from the bottom of the stairs.

Harry turned to her. "Morning, Ginny."

"You okay, Harry?" she asked.

"Yeah I'm fine," he said quickly. "Are you going in to Hogsmeade today?"

She nodded. "Yes, Fred and George have their new shop open now. They'll make tons today, what with all the Hogwarts students in town."

Harry smiled. "I'll bet they will."

Harry and Ginny walked down to the Great Hall together twenty minutes later. As they were seated, Harry glanced at the ceiling. Today promised to be a good day for once. The Sun was out and not a cloud could be seen.

Harry had just started to eat some porridge when Ethan arrived and sat down next to him. "You want to go to the -er- place this morning," asked Rafe, mindful of Ginny who had turned away when he had sat down.

"No, not today," answered Harry. "Going to Hogsmeade today."

Rafe shrugged. "Fair enough."

Soon most of the school was seated at their house tables. Harry was just finishing up when Dumbledore strode down between the tables and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Professor?"

"Good morning, Harry. I wonder if we could go to the Entrance hall for a moment and have a talk?"

Harry nodded. "I'll be back in a minute," he said to Ron and Hermione.

Harry rose and followed Dumbledore out of the Hall. On the way out he caught Padma's eye and gave her a small smile. Dumbledore and Harry stood in the deserted Entrance Hall. Everyone was in the Great Hall, there was no one about.

"What did you want, Professor?"

"Your friends are going to Hogsmeade, Harry?"

"Ron and Hermione, yes. What's wrong with that?"

"Well, the Fidelius charm will not hide them passed the gates of this castle. They leave and he can reach them."

Damn thought Harry *that was true* "I already know that, but I don't think they won't go?"

Dumbledore smiled. "I expect they wouldn't. I just thought you should know that they will not be unguarded. Members of the Order have been stationed all over Hogsmeade for today. You'll probably recognise a few of them but it would be best if you don't approach them. Voldemort knows of the Order's existence, we do not want to give too much away."

Harry nodded with understanding. "Is that all, Professor?"

Dumbledore appeared thoughtful. "Actually, Harry, there was one more thing. A growing number of people have come to see me concerning your well being. Not just students but Professors as well. They seem to think you're not well, that you seem run-down. Is everything all right?"

Harry sighed. "Yeah... well, I- I just have some trouble sleeping. Bad dreams...."

"I am sorry you have to bear these things, Harry."

"I'll be fine, sir. It's- It's not that bad really, just some nights I don't sleep very well." It was a lie. Harry could tell Dumbledore knew it was a lie.

"Very well, Harry. Do come see me if you need some help, though."

People had started to emerge from the Hall now, breakfast was over. Harry said his goodbyes to Dumbledore and moved through the crowd looking for Padma. He stood on his toes and spotted Ron and Hermione emerge through the wooden doors. He was just about to go over to them when someone called his name.

"Harry."

Harry turned in the direction of the voice. It was Padma, standing at the

base of the stairs. He squeezed his way through the crowd and over to her. "Ready to go?" he asked.

She smiled. "Yes."

After passing Filch, the two of them walked out of the castle together. On his way past, Harry nodded to Ron and Hermione and said he'd see them later. As it had promised, the day was turning out fine. Harry and Padma walked down through the castle grounds in the long line of students in their way to Hogsmeade. They talked normally most of the way, but just when they were through the castle gates, the sixth year Slytherins appeared. Needless to say, Malfoy caught sight of Harry and Padma.

"Shit, Potter, another one? What happened to Chang, she was a lot better looking than that one."

Harry turned and saw Malfoy standing about ten yards away, flanked by Crabbe and Goyle. As quick as a flash Harry had his wand in his hand, he would've used it but he felt a hand on his shoulder. "Just let him be, Harry," said Padma quietly. "He's not worth it...."

Harry looked at her for a moment and then let his wand drop to his side. The flow of students from the castle had stopped to see what would happen next. Potter verse Malfoy was always a good show. Harry sighed and turned back to Malfoy. "What's the matter, Potter, lost your nerve? Is Patil keeping you on too short of a leash?" Crabbe and Goyle laughed stupidly behind Malfoy, as did the other Slytherins. No one else in the crowd laughed, though.

Harry had had enough. "Tell me, Malfoy, which one of the two lucky lads behind you is your date? Crabbe or Goyle?" Most people in the crowd laughed at this one. It wiped the smirk of Malfoy's face. He gave Harry a venomous look before turning away sharply and walking off, Crabbe and Goyle in tow.

"Sorry about him," apologised Harry to Padma.

"Its okay, Harry."

Soon enough the two of them were walking down the high street of

Hogsmeade. They passed by the little thatched cottages and shops, Hogwarts students coming in and out of most of them. Up the busy street they walked, until they came to a store Harry had to go in.

"Oh, let's go in here," he said happily.

Padma smiled. "Okay."

Harry and Padma entered Weasley's Wizard Wheezes. It was busy, extremely busy. From floor to ceiling stood extremely strange products marked with even stranger names. There were Hogwarts students everywhere. Harry had a hard time getting through the crowd with Padma and over to the sales desk.

"Can I help you?" asked a pretty young witch from behind the counter.

"I just wanted to speak to Fred or George, if they're here?"

She smiled. "George is in the back. Just go through that door there," she said pointing to a door along the far wall.

"Thanks."

Harry grasped Padma's hand and they braved the crowd again. Once through, Harry opened and entered the door. They stood in a room filled with cardboard boxes of all shapes and sizes, the store room.

"Is that you, Rachel? Good you can give me a hand with some of these boxes" said a familiar voice from behind a stack of boxes.

"Sorry, George, you can carry your own damn boxes. Or is it, Fred?" laughed Harry.

George Weasley poked his head from behind a box to Harry's left. "Harry! Wonderful to see you, mate." George came out from behind the box and they shook hands. "And who is this?" he said upon spotting Padma.

"Padma Patil," said Padma extending her hand.

"George Weasley," said George taking her hand. "So, what brings you here, Harry?"

"Just popped in to say hello."

"And where is my little brother?"

"He'll probably be in later with Hermione," said Harry.

"With Hermione, aye?"

Harry laughed. "It's not what you think. I can tell Ron would like it to be, but he just won't ask her."

George shook his head and tried to appear thoughtful, but failed when he laughed. "Yeah, well he's always been stupid?"

They talked like this for several minutes. "Do you know we nearly ran old Zonko's Joke shop out of business? But instead we became partners. Zonko's is now part owned by Weasley's Wizard Wheezes," said George happily.

Harry could tell that George needed to get back to his boxes. Harry broke off the conversation. "We'll see you later, George. Tell Fred I said hi."

"Will do, Harry. See you later, Padma."

Harry and Padma said goodbye and soon enough they were back out on the street. Harry checked his watch; it was 11:00am. "Where to now?" he asked.

"Didn't you need to but some robes?" said Padma.

"Oh.... yeah.... I don't know if there is a shop here that sells robes, though?"

Padma smiled and grabbed his hand. "There's one a few streets over. Sells all the robes you could need."

Harry followed Padma into a part of Hogsmeade that he had never been in before. They came to a street and Harry spotted something down it that made him smile, but they carried on passed it. The next street wasn't much different from the rest of Hogsmeade. There were the same little thatched cottages dotted up and down it. The shops were different,

though. There were no joke shops, sweet shops or pubs. They all looked like impressive, upper class shops. Harry and Padma walked passed an armourer who made his armour out of dragon hide, a shop filled with strange instruments that would rival even Dumbledore's collection, and finally they came to a shop with the simple name, *Robes*.

They entered through the paned glass door. Harry was knocked back for a moment as he realised that this was one of those places that was bigger on the inside than it appeared from the outside. There were shelves upon shelves of all types of robes of all shapes, colours, and sizes. As far as he could see there were robes. He'd definitely found the right shop.

"May I help you, dears," said an elderly witch to Harry's left.

"Harry here needs some formal dress robes," said Padma happily.

The witch smiled and then looked Harry up and down, her eyes doing the usual flick towards his scar. "Formal dress robes, you say? Follow me." As they walked through the seeming endless racks of robes, the elderly witch introduced herself. "I'm Mrs. Olen, dears," she said.

"Padma Patil," said Padma.

"Harry Potter," said Harry.

Mrs. Olen smiled and then turned left down another row of robes. "Okay... Yes, here we are. Formal dress robes." The robes before Harry were probably the most impressive he had ever seen. "Were you looking for anything in particular?"

Harry thought for a moment. He thought about the other dress robes he had owned, before Privet Drive. They had been green. "Something green," he finally said.

"Green...." muttered Mrs. Olen. "Yes, green would suit you well."

Out of her robes she pulled out a small length of measure. It fell to the floor but immediately sprang to life and began making its way up Harry's leg. Mrs. Olen also walked away. As the tape measure was doing its work, Padma tapped Harry on the shoulder. "I'm just going to look at

some robes I saw on the way through," she said.

"Okay."

Padma walked around the corner and out of sight, just as Mrs. Olen returned carrying several green robes. "Here we are, dear. These are our finest green formal dress robes." The tape measure finished its work and jumped back into Mrs. Olen's hands. She looked at it and then pulled one of the robes from the pile she had brought with her. "These should fit, try them on."

Harry nodded and took the robes. He removed his plain black Hogwarts robes and placed them on the rack next to him. He was wearing black jeans and a black shirt underneath. Harry put on the green robes and did up the strap. They were light, very light, lighter than he had expected them to be. They were also silky to the touch; they felt very nice to wear. Harry rubbed the material between his fingers; it was very fine and smooth. They were dyed a dark green.

"Do you like these robes, Mr Potter?"

"Yeah.... Yes, yes they're excellent. I'll take them."

Harry removed the fine robes and put his Hogwarts ones back on. He followed Mrs. Olen back through the long rows of robes. Padma joined them about halfway back to the counter; she was carrying a pair of sky blue robes.

"All set?" asked Harry.

"Yes," she said smiling.

After paying for their robes they left the shop. Back outside on the street they passed witches and wizards going about their business. Harry checked his watch, it was 12:30. He and Padma walked slowly back towards the part of Hogsmeade he knew best. They talked idly as they walked and soon enough were back among the throng of Hogwarts students.

"Should we go get some lunch?" asked Harry.

Padma nodded. "Three Broomsticks?"

"Sounds good."

Harry and Padma walked across the street and entered the little inn. Harry realised instantly that they wouldn't get lunch here. The place was packed. Every table was seated with either Hogwarts students or every day patrons. It was standing room only, and that was growing thin. Padma took a few steps forward into the crowd but Harry grabbed her arm.

"Come on," he said. "I've got a better idea." She looked at him quizzically for a moment but then nodded.

Once back outside, Padma followed Harry back the way they had come. As they walked Harry had a quick look over his shoulder, he had an unexplainable feeling that someone was following them. There was no one but Hogwarts students. He turned back around and put his hand inside his robes and grasped his wand, he kept his hand there. "Tell me, Padma," he said, "have you ever been to a Muggle restaurant?"

She appeared thoughtful. "Well... when we were in France, Parvati and I, we went to this place called Mac-Doonalds."

Harry laughed. "Yeah, well this place is different. It has one of the finest Muggle delicacies, though."

They turned down the street that they had passed earlier and Harry saw it again. Padma did too and she couldn't help but smile. She followed Harry down the paved path towards the 'restaurant' and continued to smile as he held the door open for her. As she entered Harry glanced quickly back up the street the way they came, he couldn't be sure but he thought he saw someone turn into a store a lot faster than was normal, as if he were trying to get out of sight. He sighed and then tightened his grip on his wand before entering, *York Street Fish & Chips*.

Dumbledore paced his study, lost in thought. He had received reports from members of the Order pretty steadily throughout the day. *Hogsmeade was safe. Everything fine. Nothing to worry about. Death*

Eater activity zero.

The fact that there was nothing happening only increased his worry. This was the perfect opportunity for Voldemort to try something, and yet he hadn't. Nothing had been seen or heard of him since he had sent Harry the recruitment letter.

Dumbledore was just about to head down to the staff room when Fawkes, the red and gold phoenix, cried a shrill note. Dumbledore turned to Fawkes but carried on turning when he heard a tapping on his window. There was a bird outside, carrying something, that wanted to be let in. He saw the black plumage, the blood red beak, it was Voldemort's bird.

With a quick wave of his hand the window opened and the bird flew in. It swooped across the room and came to rest on Dumbledore's desk, it dropped its package and then let out an ear splitting screech. Fawkes jumped from his post, letting out his own cry and dived towards the bird. As quick as a flash Voldemort's dark eagle took flight back out of the window it had come in. Fawkes gave chase but stopped when he reached the sill, with a final cry the eagle flew away, as fast as the wind.

Dumbledore, mean while, was regarding the package the eagle had brought with great caution. He saw it to be a box of fair size, attached to the side was a piece of red parchment. He could tell it was a Howler. With a sigh Dumbledore flicked his wand towards it and the parchment rolled open.

There was silence in the room as everybody waited for the message, Dumbledore and the portraits alike. After a moment, five words pierced the quietness of the study.

"If Death is nothing, Dumbledore...."

It was Voldemort's voice, the voice of a demon. The parchment exploded in a ball of green flames, igniting the box it was attached to. Dumbledore stared apprehensively at the box as it was destroyed by the flames. The flames burnt his desk but it didn't matter, whatever was in there he needed to see.

The box was reduced to ash in the flames, revealing its contents. Dumbledore sighed once the contents were shown, and several of the portraits around the room gasped. Dumbledore blinked and then rubbed his eyes behind his half moon spectacles. He was staring at the rotting, burnt head of a man.

"What can I get you, love?" asked a small witch from behind the counter.

"Two chips, thanks. Large," said Harry.

The witch nodded. "Right away, love."

As she busied herself with the fryer, Harry asked a question that was gnawing away at him. "Didn't expect to see a fish & chip store in a wizarding village?" he said.

The lady smiled. "My dad's a Muggle, he owns a string of chippy's up and down the country. I thought the wizarding world was missing out on something good, so I set up shop here a few months ago. Business has been pretty good, actually."

The lady shook the chips in the oil and then turned round and dumped them on the paper. She wrapped them up. "That be all, love?"

Harry nodded thanks and handed over some coins. He and Padma said goodbye and walked back out onto the street. Once back outside Harry instinctively looked up the road to where he thought that man had been. It was deserted; they were the only ones on the street. This made Harry slightly nervous.

He walked alongside Padma as quickly as he could without arousing her suspicion. After a few minutes Harry sighted the high street and people. They were back in the busy part of Hogsmeade without incident.

Now that they were back among the crowds, Harry relaxed his grip on his wand. He and Padma walked passed the street though and on until they were walking through a park near the edge of town.

They walked alongside of a river, as they ate their chips and talked. A

small group of ducks was following them along the waters edge, hoping for a chip or two. Harry and Padma walked up on to a little stone bridge that spanned the little river, about ten metres long.

They came to a stop in the centre of the bridge and Harry sat down on the raised stone wall, his legs hanging over the edge towards the river, Padma did the same. All the while the ducks circled underneath them.

"This is nice," said Padma, putting the bag with her robes in against the bridge wall.

"It is," agreed Harry. He could see the castle of Hogwarts in the distance, just above the line of trees. *This river must run into the lake* he thought. A steady flow of people were walking over the bridge, some were Hogwarts students, others not quite so. Harry still felt they were being watched, but from where was a mystery.

"I've really enjoyed today," said Padma smiling.

"Me too," he said honestly, throwing a chip to the ducks. *Today has been good, best time I've had in a while....* "I'd love to do it again sometime."

"Well there's that Order of Merlin thing."

Harry smiled. "Yeah, that won't be too bad if I'm going with you."

There was a moment of silence in which Harry threw some more chips to the ducks. He felt happy at the moment, which was something that didn't happen much at all lately, he didn't want to lose it. Sitting next to Padma on this bridge eating chips, it made Harry feel like he was someone normal. Just a normal kid out on a date with a girl he liked, not the mortal enemy of the Dark Lord, not the boy who lived, but a normal teenage kid.

Without actually knowing when or how it happened, he and Padma were sitting a lot closer together. He looked into her eyes, she into his, neither of them saying anything. Slowly, so slowly, Harry leaned in towards her. Padma didn't back away or try to stop him, and ever so gently his lips brushed hers.

Harry moved back a few inches and looked into Padma's eyes. She seemed nervous for a moment and was biting her bottom lip, but then

she smiled. This time Padma leaned closer to Harry and caught his lips. It lasted longer this time, they kissed gently at first but then slowly their mouths opened a little more and Padma slipped her tongue in. If Harry was happy a minute ago, it was nothing compared to how he felt now. All his cares, all his troubles were forgotten in this one fantastic moment where he felt happy just to be alive.

It was short lived, though. Out of the corner of his eye Harry saw something flash. He broke away from Padma and almost instantly he had his wand in his hand. But what he had mistaken for the flash of a curse was actually the flash of a camera. Standing about two metres away was a small wizard holding a camera to his eye. There was another click and a flash and the man brought the camera down, a huge grin plastered across his face. Harry stood up, angry.

"Smile, Mr. Potter," the man said, 'you've just made the *Daily Prophet*.' The man laughed as Harry lunged forward at the camera, but took a quick step back and with a small pop, Disapparated.

Shit thought Harry *shit, shit, shit... This could cost me....* Harry turned back to Padma, who was trying very hard not to laugh.

"I'm sorry, Padma," said Harry. *Shit, shit, shit....*

"Oh, Harry, don't worry about it, its okay," she finished laughing.

No, no it isn't he thought. He sat back down next to her on the stone wall. *Well now I know who was following us... shit....*

Padma was still trying not to laugh next to him. "What's so funny?" he asked.

"I was just wondering about what my parents are going to think when they see that?"

It's not your parents seeing it that worries me....

Harry sighed and removed his glasses. He began to clean them on his robes but squeezed a little too hard and one of the lenses cracked. Padma had stopped laughing now. "Here, let me," she said, pulling out her wand. "Reparo!" The spell hit the cracked glass and fixed it

seamlessly.

"Thanks," he muttered replacing his glasses.

"Is something the matter, Harry?" she asked.

Yes. "No," he said trying to sound cheerful. He leaned in closer to her again and kissed her on the cheek. "No, let's get going back to the castle, aye."

Padma smiled and stood up. Harry picked up their bags and began to walk down off the bridge when he felt Padma grasp his hand with hers and fall into line next to him.

The two of them strolled along the riverside, talking very little, both just happy to be in each other's company. Soon they were back on the Hogsmeade high street. It wasn't as busy as it had been a few hours ago, most students had gone back to Hogwarts.

The village of Hogsmeade was soon behind them and they were walking passed the hill on which the Shrieking Shack was built. As Harry and Padma walked back up the winding dirt road to Hogwarts, Harry couldn't help but think.... *what have I done? What if he sees the paper, of course he'll see the paper... who won't?* In a small corner of his mind, Harry thought logically that if he was going to be seeing Padma, there was no way it would have stayed hidden for long.

Harry glanced at Padma as they walked through the gates and back on to Hogwarts grounds. She was walking with a smile on her face, and Harry knew why; she was happy, but she didn't know what the photograph could mean, if seen by the wrong people....

Harry looked out across the grounds; people were playing by the lake or relaxing under the trees on probably the last sunny day of the year. It was at times like this that Harry realised just how different he really was. These kids went about their lives completely oblivious to the war. He'd heard them in the halls and around the school. They saw it as someone else's problem, Voldemort was someone else's problem, the Death Eater's were someone else's problem, and the fighting would be done by someone else. They didn't have to deal with the things Harry had to, and

that's what made him different. He was the someone else that they talked about, the one whose problem it was to rid the world of Voldemort.

And as Harry walked up the track next to Padma, watching the first and second year kids happily playing by the lake, a realisation dawned on him. He was glad it was his problem, glad none of those kids had to feel the way he did, glad that they could play carefree without the fear of the Dark Lord hanging over them every hour of the day. He was glad.

Harry was brought back to the present as they reached the entrance to the castle. He hopped up the steps and opened the wooden door, allowing Padma to walk through first. Once inside the castle they linked hands again and made their way up the stairs in the Entrance Hall. They soon came to the moving staircases; Harry had to go left, Padma right.

"Thanks for today, Harry, it was really great," she said happily.

Harry smiled and handed her the bag that held her robes. "I enjoyed it too."

There was a moment taken and then Padma took a step towards him and kissed him quickly on the lips. This made Harry very happy and he kissed her back, his arms around her waist, hers around his neck. "See you soon, Padma," he finally said as they separated.

"Goodbye, Harry," she replied with a smile before turning away and beginning her walk up the ancient stairs.

Harry waited until she was out of sight before he began to walk up to Gryffindor tower. As he walked, though, he couldn't help but think one thing.... *What have I done?*

Chapter 8 - When Enemies Meet

Often we have no time for our friends, but all the time in the world for our enemies.

--Unknown

"Can you believe this?" exclaimed Harry over breakfast on Monday morning. He was holding a copy of the Prophet that Hermione had just passed him.

Hermione smiled. "You two look so cute," she said happily, staring at the picture of Harry and Padma on the bridge. Ron suppressed a laugh.

"Have you even read this, Hermione?" said Harry exasperated. "Listen, and this is a direct quote, '*In between thwarting dementor attacks and fighting Death Eaters, Potter finds time to address his raging teenage hormones....*'"

Ron couldn't stop from laughing this time. Harry sighed and put the paper down; he chanced a glance over to the Ravenclaw table and saw Padma reading the Prophet with a smile on her face. *Well if she could smile at it....* Harry was lost within his own thoughts for a moment before someone called his name.

"Harry." It was Ron. "Harry, come on. Transfiguration."

Leaving the paper behind, Harry rose from his seat. Slinging his bag over his back the three of them began to walk up to Transfiguration. They were soon seated and awaiting Professor McGonagall's instructions. As far as Harry's animagus training was going, it wasn't. McGonagall had yet to find a griffin. Harry had been practicing the other skills he'd learnt so as not to forget them.

Transfiguration gave way to Care of Magical Creatures, which in turn gave way to Defence Against the Dark Arts. Harry had yet to duel one of his close friends yet, but he knew it was coming. Having never lost a duel, Moody saw fit to pit him against someone two or three times a lesson. And the only people he hadn't duelled were Ron, Hermione, Padma, and Neville.

"Right. Good afternoon," growled Moody. "Straight into it then. Weasley and... Granger, you're up."

Hermione and Ron stood in the centre of the room. From where Harry sat he could see that Ron looked understandably nervous. Hermione on

the other hand looked calm and collected. There was a bow and a few steps taken backwards. Neither of them moved, each waiting for the other to cast a spell.

A full minute passed, before Moody barked at them to get going. This seemed to shake Hermione out of a trance and she quickly fired the first curse. "Furunculus."

This one flew through the air in a blaze of blue sparks and hit Ron in the hand. Instantly, and viciously, his hand exploded in a wave of big green boils. "Ow," he cried shaking his hand up and down. "Locomotor Mortis." Ron quickly shot the leg locker curse at Hermione; she sidestepped and dodged it gracefully.

"Rictusempra," shouted Hermione. In between cradling his hurt hand, Ron was now holding his sides laughing as a result of Hermione's tickling charm. She was smiling now. "Stupefy," she said mercifully.

It had been one-sided the whole way. From what Harry could tell, Ron didn't have the courage to curse Hermione, that said Hermione probably would have won anyway. Her knowledge of curses and charms was excellent, as was her ability to use them. She revived Ron who looked around himself dazedly for a moment before sitting up, brushing his boil covered hand against the floor in the process, causing him to wince in pain.

"Oh," said Hermione. She grasped his arm and raised her wand. After muttering a small healing spell the boils on Ron's hand disappeared. Hermione let her hand linger longer than was necessary on Ron's, and this wasn't lost on Ron. Harry smiled to himself; he saw the connection between them, even if no one else did. They sat down and Harry saw they were both blushing a bit.

"Next up," began Moody, "Potter and... Patil, Padma."

Oh dear thought Harry this could be a bit difficult....

As he moved into the centre square, he glanced at Padma; she was smiling but still looked decisively nervous. They stood close to each other before the bow. "You see the Prophet article?" she asked with the sound

of laughter in her voice.

Harry smiled. "Thank you for helping me address my raging teenage hormones," he said quietly so only she would hear. She was laughing as they bowed and took a few steps backwards.

Padma fired the first curse. "Stupefy!"

Harry dodged this one easily. *Well she wants this over quickly* thought Harry *okay...* Quick to counterattack, Harry raised his wand. "Impedimenta," he shouted.

Padma ducked and it flew over her head. She brought her wand underneath her and fired the disarming charm at Harry. He dodged it expertly and retaliated just as quick. "Constrictus Amropa."

The ropes shot out of Harry's wand and wrapped themselves around Padma's legs. She fell to the floor hard but wasn't fazed. Calmly and quickly she removed the ropes and was soon back on her feet. "Stupefy."

Harry sidestepped to the right and successfully dodged the curse. Harry looked at Padma and saw the amusement in her eyes, she was enjoying this. With a small smile to himself, Harry shot a curse. "Impedimenta." This one caught Padma on the shoulder and she slowed to a stop.

Harry calmly walked over to her and plucked the wand out of her unmoving hand. He'd won. "Well done, Potter," barked Moody. "Still undefeated. I hope everyone was taking notes on Potter's technique?" Several people shifted uncomfortably under Moody's gaze, they had been too engrossed in the duel to do anything.

Harry turned back to Padma, she was still moving incredibly slowly. "Finite Incantatum," he said. Padma blinked and then stumbled forward. Harry smiled and handed her her wand back. She looked confused as to how she lost. "Orchideous," muttered Harry, a bunch of flowers sprouting at his wand tip. "Nice duel," he said handing Padma the flowers. "It was the Impediment jinx that got you," he whispered in her ear. She smiled sheepishly and blushed as she took the flowers.

They went and sat back down. *That wasn't as bad as it could have been*

thought Harry.

The morning of October 31st dawned like any other. Harry sat alone in the armchairs by the fire; it was still too early for anyone else to be up. As was his way, he sat deep in thought. It was fifteen years to the day since his parents had died, and Voldemort had been defeated for a time... *Time thought Harry that's all his parents sacrifice bought the world, time. Fourteen years of borrowed time, which was wasted....* In previous years, Harry had looked at the photo album Hagrid had given him, the one with pictures of his parents in it. But that was no longer possible. Voldemort had taken away that piece of him as well; it had been destroyed along with Privet Drive.

Harry found silent tears rolling down his cheeks, though he didn't remember shedding them. He swatted them away angrily. *Crying was a weakness he thought can't let them see me cry....*

Harry was in a daze most of that day. When asked if he was okay, his immediate response was "I'm fine." Ron and Hermione knew what was bothering him, they were the only ones that did. They tried to help him, to talk, but Harry didn't want to. It was his way of dealing with the grief, always had been. Tomorrow he would appear fine but on the inside he still carried the pain. It was his way....

The Halloween feast that night was its usual spectacular affair. Hundreds, if not thousands, of enchanted pumpkins floated near the ceiling; glowing eerily from the candle light within. The walls were hung with black and orange drapes that swirled and changed between the two colours. Live bats hung from the rafters and the drapes, screeching occasionally.

Harry sat there absently, gazing at the amazingly decorated hall around him. To everyone else this night was to be celebrated, to him he just didn't see the point. *What was the point he thought this won't help win the war. This does nothing except make people forget the horror of the world they lived in....*

Harry half-heartedly ate some of the enormous amount of food that littered the table, but he just wasn't in the mood. He again gazed around at all the happy faces in the Hall. Kids laughing, smiling; none of them

having been touched by the war in any way yet.

Without saying goodbye or giving any excuses, Harry got up from the table and walked away. Hermione saw him go. She began to stand up herself when she felt a hand on her shoulder. It was Ron. He just shook his head sadly and watched Harry leave. Hermione sighed and sat back down, all the while Ron's hand never leaving her shoulder.

Harry walked out of the Hall. Just as he left his eyes connected with Padma's but he didn't want to stay now. Something of how he felt must have shown on his face because the last thing he saw was Padma's worried look. He walked slowly but surely up the moving stairs. He was a storm of emotions as he reached the seventh floor, having planned to return to the common room. But just as he was about to get off the stairs, he had another idea, a way to try and clear his head.

Harry walked with a purpose now, up several more flights of stairs and along the dark empty corridors of Hogwarts. Left, right, and then left again brought him to the bottom of the winding staircase up to the top of the astronomy tower. Without pausing Harry dashed up the stairs, taking two or three at a time. He reached the top and went through the wooden, glass panelled doors and out onto the balcony where he had spent many earlier years gazing at the heavens.

It was quiet up here, exactly what Harry had hoped for. A place away from all the noise. He stood next to the stone wall and gazed out across the land. Thousands of stars dotted the night sky, hundreds of thousands. The night was clear, not a cloud in the sky. Across the grounds he saw Hagrid's cabin, only because of the faint glow of light that emanated from within. Behind that he saw the enormous dark mass that was the Forbidden Forest. To his left he could just make out some of the taller buildings of Hogsmeade. It was peacefully, calming; it was just what Harry needed.

Up here he saw everything flash before his eyes in crystal clear clarity. His parent's death, Cedric's death, Sirius's death, and the Dursley's death. Seven lives needlessly lost. But for the first time ever, Harry felt a moment of acceptance. He accepted they were dead, however much he missed them or wanted them back... he never could. They were gone, to

where he did not know and probably never would know while he was alive.

The moment of acceptance was replaced almost instantly, though, by the feeling of guilt. Death upon death, one way or another brought back to him. His fault. Harry sighed and put his hands in his pockets, he grasped his wand. *Brother wands... One and the same.* As he held it, Harry felt a slight prickling in his scar. It was followed by a short, but still painful, burning. Harry jerked his head backwards and nearly fell over in surprise. He'd seen it, a quick flash and then it was gone. *Someone had just received the Dark Mark, been initiated into the Death Eaters* thought Harry with a sigh *just one more enemy.*

"Harry?" said a familiar and now welcome voice.

"Hello, Padma," he said turning around.

"Harry, are you okay? It's just- I saw you in the Hall and-" Her voice was full of concern.

"Yeah I'm okay... now. Just felt a bit down a moment ago. Thought some fresh air would help, it did."

She smiled, with what looked like relief. "We haven't had much chance to talk this week," she said.

It was true. He hadn't seen much of Padma at all except in Magical Creatures and Defence Against the Dark Arts. "Let's talk now then."

Padma nodded and smiled reassuringly. She and Harry moved over to the far left of the balcony and sat down on the bench there. For a few minutes they talked aimlessly, mostly about Hogsmeade last weekend, or the Prophet article on Monday. After a short while, though, Harry saw Padma shiver and pull her cloak closer around herself. *It was cold* thought Harry. He hadn't noticed it before; too caught up in his own emotions. Harry looked at Padma for a moment, and then nervously moved a bit closer to her and stretched his arm across her back and onto her shoulder.

Padma responded by leaning over and into the groove beneath Harry's shoulder, just above his heart. They held each other. Harry couldn't

remember feeling this happy in years. Just sitting close, holding someone, who cared. The sat there for a while, gazing out over the vastness of the country around them.

Harry didn't know how much time had passed, but looking at his watch he saw that it was just coming up nine o'clock. School rules stated that students should be in their house by nine, but Harry didn't want to leave just yet.

"Padma," he said quietly.

"Hmm?"

"We didn't get to talk much."

"No..." she laughed.

Harry smiled; the troubles of today seemed to belong to someone else while he sat with her. He knew, once she was gone, that his problems would return. But for now he was happy with every moment that he got. It took him a moment to notice that Padma was looking up at him.

"What?" he asked.

Without saying anything Padma brought her head upwards and caught his lips with her own. Harry tensed for a moment but then relaxed into the kiss. No reporters this time, no distractions. Harry opened his mouth a little wider, as did she, and their tongues danced.

This was what life was, thought Harry; moments like this was what it was all about, what made everything worth it. Padma put her arms around his neck, and Harry held her just above her waist. She pulled away only to turn her head slightly and come back a moment later. Harry felt his entire body grow warm at the touch of her lips, the night was freezing, but this moment was for them.

He had been at the other end of the scale; lost, cold, staring fear directly in the face... the Dementors kiss that had nearly been delivered twice upon him. This was the exact opposite, warmth... a kiss that had a soul, not trying to take one away.

With more than a slight feeling of reluctance, it ended. Harry and Padma broke away and stared into each others eyes. "Wow..." was all she said.

Harry smiled and laughed. "Come on," he said, beginning to feel the cold of the night again, "let's get back down. It's freezing up here."

As the two of them walked back down the stairs together, hand in hand, Harry couldn't help but think, in some small corner of his mind, that this was too good to last....

"The key thing in Apparation is concentration," said Ethan. It was Saturday, November 2nd and Harry and Ethan were once again in the Shrieking Shack. "Don't get distracted and you've got nothing to worry about." He proved his point by Apparating back and forth across the room twice.

Harry nodded. "When do you think I can try it?"

Rafe shrugged. "Try it now if you want? It'll either work or it won't."

"What about splinching?"

Ethan smiled. "There's a chance that could happen... but you'll never know unless you try it."

Nervously, Harry removed his wand from within his robes and pointed it at himself. He shook his arms and tried to clear his head. Remembering everything he could about what Rafe had told him, he pictured the other side of the room as clearly as he could in his mind's eye. Every detail no matter how insignificant. A deep breath and then....

"Apyraceus."

Harry felt a strange feeling in the pit of his stomach, like nausea, and his vision blurred. It was gone a moment later though and he was standing.... in the same place. He glanced at Ethan, he appeared to be thinking.

"Hmm... Not bad, but you didn't go anywhere?"

"I felt something...."

Rafe nodded. "Yeah, you sort of went all fuzzy and I could see right

through you. You were transparent. Almost, but not quite the gold. We'll keep trying."

They spent a few more hours in the shack but try as he might; Harry couldn't Apparate from one side of the room to the other. They walked back to Hogwarts, defeated.

"You're walking a very fine line, Potter," whispered Snape so only Harry could hear him. It was Wednesday afternoon, and Harry was an hour through double Potions. "Your last essay scrapped an 'Acceptable'."

Since Harry didn't trust what would come out of his mouth if he opened it, he didn't say anything. Snape moved on, handing out essays as he went. Harry continued mashing his mushrooms in silence. What's his problem?" asked Ethan, who was sitting to Harry's left.

Where to begin? thought Harry. "We're just not the best of friends...." Understatement of the century, but Harry thought it would do.

Rafe nodded and looked at his own essay. He'd also got an 'Acceptable'. It didn't mean much to him. He had been at Hogwarts going on a month or so now, and didn't much care for the essays.

"We have roughly an hour left," said Snape who had finished handing back essays, and was now standing at the head the room. "Your potion must be completed and handed to me in a phial before that time is up. This one will be assessed." Harry saw Snape's eyes flicker over his for a moment. He would love for Harry to screw this up.

This made Harry take extra special care in making the potion. He read each instruction three times, and weighed the ingredients to the exact gram. No mistakes, no failure. When the time was up Harry stared at his potion with pride. It was perfect. He expected at least an "Exceeded Expectations' for this; though knowing Snape it would be an 'Acceptable', even if it did deserve better. He stoppered his phial and hurriedly placed it on Snape's desk before exiting the dungeon as quickly as possible.

As Harry walked up the stairs, he stumbled and shook his head. A feeling of immense dizziness had just assaulted him. He pressed his hand against his forehead, he knew what was coming. On que, pain

ripped through his scar and Harry put a hand on the wall to steady himself. As quickly as it had come, it was gone. All he saw was a flash of red eyes.

His scar was still prickling as Ron, Hermione and Ethan caught up to him. Rather than worrying anyone, he said nothing as they walked to Divination, Hermione to Arithmancy.

"Crucio," shouted Voldemort at the nearest Death Eater. The man dropped to the floor and wretched in pain. Voldemort was angry, Potter had angered him.

He had tried to enter Potter's mind through the scar, it hadn't worked. There was too much protection, too many wards at Hogwart's for him to be able to maintain the connection. A brief second was all that he could manage.

Voldemort snapped up his wand and the thread of the Cruciatus curse broke. The Death Eater, breathing and shaking heavily, stood up as best he could and resumed his place among the ranks of the Dark Lord's inner circle. The most loyal Death Eater's.

The Dark Lord paced the room heavily. Everyone in the room avoided his gaze, less they incur his wrath. The only way the connection would work properly was if Potter was away from Hogwarts. Voldemort smiled malevolently, he would wait. Patience was a virtue he had learned a long time ago.

"Bellatrix, I have a task for you."

"I've never really thought that far ahead," said Harry.

"Oh, come on. Surely some time or another it has crossed your mind?"

Harry and Padma were lying by the lake, she was in his arms, as the Krup played among the reeds. It was Monday morning, and the day was turning out to be quite nice. "Well, I suppose the only thing I've ever

thought of doing once I'm out of school was to become an Auror."

Padma nodded. "You would be really good at that," she said honestly.

"What do you want to do?"

"I'm going to be a Healer," she answered instantly.

Harry smiled. "Why?"

"The war," she whispered. "My parents told me about the last time You-Know-Who was alive, how there was a shortage in Healers and it cost many people their lives."

Harry sat up now and looked at Padma. "Let's hope the war is over by the end of seventh year then...." Harry tried to sound cheerful, as if this was a real possibility. Inside he really thought that it wasn't. The end of their seventh year was eighteen months away or so, and the war was just starting to heat up now.

Padma smiled, but it was an empty smile. "Do you really think it could be....?"

No... "Yes..."

"But I don't know of anyone who could defeat You-Know-Who... except you...."

Harry smiled slightly. "We'll see what happens."

"Will you fight him, Harry?" she asked quietly.

Harry's thoughts immediately jumped to the prophecy. *At the hand of the other....* "Probably... sooner or later...."

Harry could tell she was upset. "Aren't you scared? You-Know-Who has killed thousands of people.... what if you die...?"

He sighed heavily. "Voldemort." She twitched at the sound of his name. "Would like you to believe he is invincible. He isn't. He is a really powerful wizard, but I've still got to try. Death or not, my life wouldn't be worth living if I don't try and stop him."

"You sound like you don't have a choice..."

Harry blinked. *A choice...? He didn't have a choice. He had never had a choice. Even before he was born something had decided this life for him, that damn prophecy....* "I don't. I can't live while Voldemort does...."

Padma sighed and put her arms around Harry. Harry would have done the same if it wasn't for what happened next. There was a screech and then a familiar bird landed on Harry's knee.

"Hello, Fawkes," said Harry.

"Oh my...." gasped Padma. "A phoenix."

Harry reached out and stroked Fawkes just below his neck, the Phoenix hummed happily, the wondrous sound filling the air. "This is Fawkes, Padma. He lives with Professor Dumbledore."

Padma brought her hand down the bird's plume and Fawkes sang again with content. Harry smiled and then he saw the note attached to his leg. "Is that for me?" he asked.

Fawkes brought his head down and up, a nod. Harry carefully removed the parchment and broke the wax seal. Needless to say it was from Dumbledore.

Dear Harry,

Please could you come to my office immediately. We have a few things that need to be discussed.

Sincerely,

Albus Dumbledore

Harry nodded and folded the parchment and put it in his pocket. He turned back to Fawkes. "Tell him I'm on my way," he told the bird. Fawkes sang with acknowledgement and disappeared in a circle of flames. Harry now turned to Padma. "I've got to go see, Dumbledore. Could you take Little Harry and tell Hagrid?"

Padma smiled and nodded. "Okay. I'll see you later."

He leaned over and kissed her quickly on the lips. "See you later."

Harry took off across the grounds at a quick pace, wondering what Dumbledore could possibly want. As Harry traipsed up the stone gravel path, he felt a slight twinge of pain in his scar. These were getting more and more frequent. For the past day or so it had been happening a few times an hour. Every time it did happen, Harry got a brief flash of blood red eyes and nothing more.

After ten minutes of walking through the castle he came to Dumbledore's office. It was open, the gargoyles were up; he was expected. He climbed the circular staircase and knocked three times on the oak door.

"Come in, Harry," said the calm voice of Dumbledore from within.

Harry opened and walked through the door. Dumbledore was seated at his desk, writing something down, he gestured for Harry to take a seat opposite him. Harry crossed the room and sat down. He briefly noticed Fawkes back on his perch. "Hello, Professor."

"How are you, Harry?"

Harry's immediate response was "Fine..."

Dumbledore nodded. "I think, Harry, we need to discuss this award ceremony of yours in a few days time."

"Hmm, I was meaning to come see you."

"First of all I believe I have yet to congratulate you on this-"

"It doesn't matter," he replied emotionlessly. "I'm not really looking forward to it."

"Why is that?"

Harry didn't say anything for a moment. "I don't see the point in it," he finally said. "I mean... I know it's a great honour and all. But what does it matter?"

Dumbledore was silent as he surveyed Harry over his half moon spectacles. Eventually he spoke. "You believe it doesn't matter because

of the prophecy." It wasn't a question, Harry knew it was true.

"Yes...." he whispered.

Dumbledore sighed. "You believe that your life doesn't matter anymore? That this prophecy has doomed you to death...."

Harry was frustrated for a moment but then it passed, Dumbledore always seemed to be able to guess what he was thinking. "I could never duel with him the way you did at the Ministry," Harry said earnestly. "You were amazing... and so was Voldemort."

"There is time, Harry. You haven't lost yet and I don't think that he will be your end. Once again I am sorry that this burden has to be yours. If it was in my power to take it away I would, but it isn't nor anyone else's either...."

"How did you do it, sir? How did you defeat Grindelwald?"

Dumbledore closed his eyes and breathed in heavily. "That was fifty one years ago. War tore apart the entire planet, millions died because of Grindelwald's influence. Someone had to end it, so I did...."

"Was he anything like Voldemort?"

"No, Harry," he said honestly. "Grindelwald was human; he never tried to become immortal. Compared to Voldemort, Grindelwald was just a shadow."

Harry was silent for a moment and he stared at a scorch mark on Dumbledore's desk, then he remembered something Padma had said by the lake. "I never had a choice in this...."

"Our choices make us who we are, Harry. Don't ever forget that. Though it seems fate has given you little choice in this matter."

"So it's my fate to face him?"

"Yes, Harry. It was mine to defeat Grindelwald; it will be yours to defeat Voldemort."

Harry sighed. "We got a little sidetracked.... you wanted to talk about the

award ceremony."

Dumbledore didn't speak for a moment and there seemed to be little to no twinkle in his eyes. "The Minister has informed me of the details. You and, I believe Miss. Patil?" The twinkle was back and a small smile of amusement was present on the old wizard's face. Harry nodded. "You and Miss. Patil will take a Portkey to the Leaky Cauldron from there a car will be waiting to take you to the venue."

"What about my other friends, they'd like to go as well."

"Ron and Hermione?" asked Dumbledore.

"Yes and Ginny Weasley."

Dumbledore nodded. "They can accompany me to the Ministry."

"You'll be there, Professor?"

"Of course, Harry. As will several familiar faces," he replied.

"Well, it might not be so bad after all. Oh! I don't suppose Ethan Rafe could come as well could he?" Harry said thoughtfully.

"It's your night, Harry. Ethan is more than welcome," replied Dumbledore with a sound to his voice that led Harry to believe that he knew more than he was letting on.

Could he know about the Apparation....? No... no, not unless Rafe told him.... "Sounds good to me."

Harry was kept busy over the next week. In between normal daily lessons he juggled Quidditch practice, DA meetings, and to a lesser more secretive extent, Apparation practice. Try as he might Harry wasn't there yet in Apparation, though Rafe said he was making progress. Harry had brought Ethan to his first DA meeting on Thursday night and he had wowed them all with his deep knowledge of curses, even Hermione was impressed and she'd read it all.

He was kept so busy that he didn't notice the weekend of the 16th until it was almost on him. Harry sat in his armchair by the fire; he was the only one left in the common room at this hour. He didn't think it was possible

but over the past week his nightmares had worsened. He saw a man tied to an altar explode in a red, bloody mess. And as recently as two nights ago he had started to dream of his friend's death. It was horrific, and he woke up screaming; usually waking up Ron and Ethan with him, though for reasons he didn't understand Seamus, Dean, and Neville just slept right through it.

The Saturday of the awards ceremony passed rather quickly for Harry. He had spent most of the day with Padma down on the grounds, but at four o'clock she left to get ready, two hours before they had to go. He made his way back up to the common room to find Ron playing chess with Ethan, Ron was winning.

"Hey, lads. Where's Hermione?"

Ron picked up his queen but then shook his head and placed it back down, much to the queen's annoyance. "She's gone to get ready for tonight," said Ron. "We don't even have to go for two hours!"

After lounging about in the common room for an hour, Harry thought it best if he went and got ready. At a quarter to six, after a shower and a shave, Harry came back down to the common room wearing his new dress robes. He turned a few heads as he waited at the bottom of the stairs for one of his friends. Every girl from fourth year and up was staring appreciatively. At ten to six there was still no sign of anyone so Harry thought it best if he went and met Padma in the entrance hall like they had planned.

On the way down through the castle Harry hardly met anyone and reached the entrance hall without incident. Padma wasn't there yet so Harry went and sat at the bottom of the stairs. After about five minutes he heard someone call his name from the landing. "Harry." It was Padma.

Harry stood up and turned around. What he saw made his jaw drop. It was Padma, she was unbelievably beautiful. Harry couldn't believe what he was seeing. She was wearing the blue robes that she had bought the other week in Hogsmeade, although now she wore them Harry saw that it was more of a dress. It cut off beneath her shoulders leaving them and her arms bare. It came down to just below her knees and seemed to

change shades of blue slightly as she moved. It was very tight fitting. She wore some high heeled strap shoes on her feet. Her hair was tied back and up and held in place with two thin sticks which created a sort of spiky wave at the back. She was beautiful, and Harry realised, she was here for him.

He walked up the steps to meet her. "Padma, I- you... you look stunning," he said sincerely.

She smiled and Harry saw she was wearing a deep red lipstick. "Thank you, Harry. You scrub up nicely as well."

Harry laughed just as Dumbledore emerged from the door to his right. "Ah, Harry, and Miss. Patil," he began, "I do hope you're ready. It is almost time for the Portkey." As Dumbledore said this he removed a spoon from within his robes and passed it to Harry. Both he and Padma held a separate end. "Ready," said Dumbledore looking at his pocket watch. "Five, four, three, two, and one."

Harry instantly felt the familiar jerk behind his navel and then the sensation of falling forward, all the while a multitude of colours swirled around him in a howling wind. But soon enough it was over and Harry felt his feet slam into the ground. Looking around himself he saw that they were in the back street behind the Leaky Cauldron, next to the entrance to Diagon Alley.

Harry grasped Padma's hand and they entered the pub. It wasn't overly busy, for which Harry was thankful. Tom the bartender spotted them though.

"Mr. Potter," he said happily rushing around from behind the counter and shaking Harry's free hand. "Congratulations."

Harry nodded his thanks. "I don't suppose you know where our driver is? Do you, Tom?"

"Yes, he is outside on the Muggle London street. Just the other side of the door."

"Thanks, Tom."

Harry tried to get out of the pub as quickly as possible, but still had to shake three more hands before he was out. Padma looked like she was enjoying herself already.

Outside, as promised, was their car. It was a very impressive looking black Mercedes. By Muggle standards this was a fine car. Standing next to rear-side door was a very nervous looking wizard. "Hello," said Harry extending his arm.

The man shook his hand somewhat quickly. "M- Mr. Potter," he said. "I'm Dale Trice your driver. And this is?"

"My name is Padma, Padma Patil."

"A pleasure," the driver bowed.

"Shall we get going?" asked Harry.

Dale nodded shakily and hurried to open the door for them. Padma got in, followed by Harry and soon they were off down the streets of London. It was no surprise that it was a magic car. It squeezed through impossible gaps and jumped lines of traffic that would otherwise take hours to get through.

They shot by Buckingham palace, over the Thames and passed parliament house. Through the endless rows of terrace housing in the suburbs and came in time to a street Harry recognised all too well. Dale brought the car to a stop just outside of the phone box that was the entrance to the Ministry of Magic. Harry remembered the last time he was in that box, and what it had led to....

"Here we are, Mr. Potter." While Harry had been distracted Dale had come around and opened his door. "Just so you know, sir, the code to the door has been changed. 310780 is the new one." Harry nodded his thanks as he and Padma exited the vehicle. The streets were quiet, eerily quiet and the dying sun was casting a pale glow on the buildings around. "I expect they're all down stairs waiting for you, Mr. Potter," finished Dale.

"Thanks, Dale," said Harry linking his arm through Padma's. "I'll see you later."

Harry and Padma walked around the car and entered the telephone box. Picking up the receiver, Harry dialled the numbers. "Three, one, zero, seven, eight, zero...."

Padma looked confused as to what Harry was doing as the dial whirled back into place. She had never been to the Ministry before and didn't know what to expect.

"Welcome to the Ministry of Magic," said a cool calm female voice. "Please state your name and business."

"Er- Harry Potter and Padma Patil. We're here-"

Harry didn't get to finish what he was saying before the telephone box/lift began descending into the ground. Apparently his name was enough to activate the box. Slowly but surely they went down and after a moment came to a stop. Harry linked Padma's arm in his own and they stepped out of the lift.

Harry wasn't prepared for what happened next. The Atrium was full of wizards and witches, all applauding him. It took him a moment to realise they were clapping for him, there were so many of them. Two hundred strong at least. Harry didn't know what to do next. He and Padma took a few steps forward before they were greeted by a familiar and unwanted face.

"Good evening, Harry," said Cornelius Fudge, the Minister of Magic. "How are you this evening?"

"Fine, fine," said Harry taking Fudge's offered hand. "I didn't expect this..." he finished looking around at the number of people here. He couldn't even put names to a few of them.

Fudge mistaking his confusion for surprise, continued. "Well it's not every day a sixth year Hogwart's student receives the Order of Merlin. This is a grand event."

Harry smiled weakly as Fudge introduced him to what he supposed were important Ministry officials. There was the Deputy Minister, a Mr. Sacks. He met with the head of each department in the Ministry, trying as he might to remember their names he couldn't. Except for Mr. Weasley, of

course. The list went on as Harry shook hand after hand, slowly making their way with Fudge towards a massive wooden door on the far side of the Atrium. Harry read a plaque in golden letters on its left side. *The Ministry of Magic Formal Events Hall.*

"Harry, this is Monsieur Delacroix," said Fudge standing next to a short man wearing some red dress robes. This man had a moustache and a beard that would rival Dumbledore's. "The French Minister of Magic."

Harry shook his hand. "It *iz* a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Potter," said Delacroix, his accent extremely strong.

"And you," replied Harry.

Standing next to the French Minister was a pretty young witch of about Harry's age. She had flowing blonde hair and deep blue eyes. "This *iz* my daughter," stated Delacroix. "'Er name *iz* Sophie." Harry greeted her as best he could and moved on.

After much hustling and worming their way through the crowds, Harry and Padma stood next to Fudge by the oak doors to the Hall. Two men either side of the doors pushed them open with a nod from Fudge.

Harry was awestruck as he walked through the doors. This Hall was amazing. It was about the size of the Great Hall at Hogwarts, but a lot nicer. Harry followed Fudge up a red carpet, passed tables covered in the finest tableware he had ever seen. They all had glowing candles floating just above the surface. Each table sat about six people. The ceiling was hung with huge chandeliers that glowed green, yellow, blue, red, all changing. Across the walls were drapes that were stitched with the crest of the Ministry, and in the centre of the room, all the tables surrounded it, was a big wooden dance floor complete with a stage. They walked across the dance floor and came to a table that was higher from the ground than the others. It was much like the staff table at Hogwarts.

Fudge led Harry up a set of stairs and passed a podium that stood erected in the middle of the platform. He was taken up to this elongated table and Fudge showed him his seat. Padma sat down next to him. To Harry's left sat Fudge, and as the Hall filled up around them more and

more people Harry didn't know joined there table. There was the French Minister, Monsieur Delacroix, to Padma's right and next to him his daughter, Sophie. And all around the table sat people who probably had important jobs but Harry didn't know. He felt very out of place.

The other two hundred strangers or so sat at the other tables around the Hall, each person seeming to know where to go. Harry talked idly to Padma and played with the small piece of paper in front of him that had his name on.

"This is incredible, Harry," said Padma excitedly.

Harry smiled. "It is rather impressive isn't it."

"Thank you for inviting me," she whispered in his ear.

"Thank you for coming," he whispered back, just as a flash went off to his right.

Ohhh great thought Harry. Just what we need, the reporters....

Everyone was almost seated now and Fudge was standing patiently at the podium in front of their table. Harry looked to where Fudge had been sitting before, and saw that to his left was another name place. This one belonged to Albus Dumbledore. Harry turned and looked out over the crowds of tables, wondering where Dumbledore was.

He scanned the tables and his eyes fell on one near the edge of the dance floor. There sat all his friends. Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and Ethan. And next to Ethan sat Dumbledore. Harry smiled and waved when they caught his eye. *Just like Dumbledore he thought to sit with his students.*

The Hall was practically full now. And Fudge cleared his magically amplified voice up at the podium. The Hall grew quiet. "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen," he began. "I would like to welcome you all to the Ministry of Magic this evening." Fudge paused as the crowd applauded. "Tonight we have a very special guest who is here to receive an award for outstanding courage and bravery in the face of danger. A man who saved the lives of fifty people earlier this year, who witnessed the rebirth of You-Know-Who, and survived the killing curse. Ladies and gentlemen, Harry Potter."

The applause was tremendous. Harry stood up and waved half-heartedly at the crowds. There were several cheers and whistles as he returned to his seat and the clapping ended. Fudge came and sat back down and clapped Harry on the shoulder as he did.

Soon enough the waiters came passed and gave everyone a menu. Harry watched Fudge peruse over his for a moment before saying "Chicken and salad." The food appeared on the plate before him and his goblet was filled with a clear white wine.

Harry ordered the same but faltered when a quick burst of pain flittered through his scar. *Voldemort was happy.*

As he ate, Harry talked mostly to Padma. But occasionally Fudge would ask him a question and he would answer as quickly as he could and turn back to Padma. When he had finished his plate cleaned itself and disappeared into the table. Harry checked his watch, it was seven-thirty. He wondered how long in to the night he'd be here. Sighing, Harry turned to Fudge and was just about to say something when his scar rippled again with pain. This one was rather painful and his hand flew up to his forehead.

"You okay, Harry?" asked Padma.

"My scar... it keeps burning...."

Padma looked frightened. "Is it... is You-Know-Who doing it," she whispered.

Harry nodded and brought his hand down, it had passed. "Don't worry... it's gone."

While this had been happening Fudge had once again returned to the podium. "Ladies and gentlemen. I hope dinner was to your liking?" Roars of approval. "And now if Mr. Potter could be so kind as to lead us in the dancing, we can get the night underway."

This surprised Harry. He didn't think he'd have to dance in front of all these people. He glanced at Padma and saw her face was alight with excitement. She practically pulled his arm out of its socket as they walked to the dance floor. Harry shrugged helplessly at Ron as they

passed his friends table. Ron just waved and laughed.

Harry and Padma came to a stop in the very centre of the floor. "What now?" he whispered.

"Just follow me," she said.

Padma put her arms around his neck and he put his just above her waist. Slowly some music started to play to Harry's left. He saw a group of musicians on a small stage that had previously gone unnoticed. They started with a slow song. Padma began to move and Harry followed suit. They were dancing on the balls of their feet, rocking back and forth slowly, taking a few steps here and there. A dozen or so flashes came from a dozen or so photographers at the edge of the floor but Harry didn't care. This was nice, calm, and peaceful. He even forgot the two hundred people watching him and just fell into step with Padma.

As the song carried on, more and more people began to make their way onto the dance floor. Soon it was pretty full. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Hermione dragging a very nervous looking Ron onto the floor. They edged their way over to them.

"All right you two?" he asked.

Hermione smiled. "Hello, Harry, Padma," she said. "This place is amazing isn't it."

Harry nodded and then turned to Ron. Ron was blushing slightly and Harry knew why. Hermione looked beautiful and it clearly wasn't lost on Ron whose eyes were practically bulging out of his head. *Did she know what she was doing?* Harry thought Hermione knew exactly what she was doing.

The song started to wound down and the dancing ended. There was some applause and then another song started up. Harry stayed on the floor for this one too, dancing slowly with Padma. About five minutes through, Harry started to feel extremely dizzy. He swayed a little and stumbled, Padma caught him. "Harry...?"

"I need to sit down," he whispered shakily. Padma nodded and supported him as they went over to the table where Dumbledore and

Ethan were sitting. Harry briefly saw Ginny dancing with a wizard he didn't know as they passed.

"Professor," said Harry sitting down next to Dumbledore.

"Harry? What is it?" Dumbledore's voice was full of concern.

"*He's up to something.... All night my scar has been hurting... and I've been feeling his emotions....*"

Dumbledore's face was grave, and Harry noticed Rafe clench his fist and leave the table. But he didn't have time to think about that now. "Emotion...?"

"He's happy. Something is going right...." He felt Padma grasp his hand and saw her worried glance.

"What do you feel now?" asked Dumbledore.

Harry thought for a moment. "Nothing... nothing it's passed. I feel fine now?" The dizziness and nausea was gone. He looked at his watch, quarter past eight. He wanted nothing more than to be back at Hogwarts in bed.

"Could you see what he was doing?" asked Dumbledore anxiously.

"No... no, just a brief glimpse of his eyes and then darkness."

The dancing went on for another hour. Harry sat at the table with Padma and Dumbledore, not really feeling up to anymore dancing. He slowly sipped on a Butterbur that a waiter had brought him and watched the others dance. Hermione was still dancing with Ron and Ginny was with a different partner that Harry recognised as Kingsley Shacklebolt. *Well* he thought *Familiar face indeed*. Harry also saw Ethan dancing with someone. He was dancing with Sophie, the French Minister of Magic's daughter. Ethan looked happy as did Sophie when he leaned over and whispered something in her ear.

At a quarter past nine Harry saw Fudge step back up to the podium. He raised his hands and the band stopped playing. "Ladies and gentlemen could you please return to your seats so we may begin the

presentation."

There was a moment given while everybody sat back down. Harry and Padma returned to their seats at the high table and Fudge continued. "Thank you." Harry noticed a small wizard standing next to Fudge holding a black case. Fudge now pulled out a scroll of parchment from within his robes and read from that. "I, Cornelius Fudge, the Minister of Magic, to hereby declare that Harry James Potter, born Thursday July 31st 1980, receives the Order of Merlin, Second Class for his bravery and heroics in saving the lives of fifty people with no thought to his own."

The room exploded with applause and Fudge waved to Harry to come up the podium. As Harry walked around the table his scar once again burned with pain, though it ended as quickly as it had come. He stood next to Fudge and shook his hand as he opened the black case that the other wizard was now holding up. Fudge then took out a medallion hung on a piece of fine material. All the while the applause continued. Shaking his hand again, Fudge placed the silver medallion over Harry's head and around his neck.

A cheer rose up from the crowd as Harry turned to face them. Before saying anything he looked at the award around his neck. It was a silver medallion, roughly the size of the ones he had seen in the Olympic sport events back when he lived at Privet Drive before finding out he was a wizard. On the front side was the crest for the Ministry. Two wands crossed over the British Isles. On the reverse side it was engraved:

Harry James Potter

Order of Merlin, Second Class

November 16th 1996

It was really nice, though it felt a bit heavy. He was brought out of his thoughts as someone next to him said something. "Come on, Harry. Speech time," said Fudge.

Harry sighed and then slowly moved closer to the podium. Looking out over the crowds he saw a few familiar faces. Ron, Hermione, Ginny and Ethan. One or two members of the Order and also Dumbledore. He

began to speak. "I -er- I'd like to thank everyone for being here tonight, to see me receive this award... I... Argh..." Harry shook his head; another small shot of pain had just ripped through his scar. He continued, though somewhat dizzily.

"The dementors that attacked... Argh... AAARRRGGGHHH." Harry screamed in pain and his hand flew up to his scar. It was burning into his very skull. His legs gave way beneath him and he fell to the floor at the base of the podium and continued to scream.

"AAARRGGHH!"

Through the pain he saw people rushing to help him. Fuzzy faces that he couldn't quite make out. Dumbledore maybe? And then something new happened, the pain stopped and he opened his eyes, but he was no longer at the base of the podium.

It was white, everything was white. He was now standing in a room that was completely white. It stretched as far as he could see in every direction, just endless white. "Potter." Harry turned round, dreading what he was about to see. That voice was all too familiar. There was the Dark Lord, standing barely two metres away; Harry fell back in surprise at how close he was.

He wondered how he'd gotten here from the award ceremony. How had this happened? Was it a Portkey? No... This isn't real; he's planting images in my head like he did last year.

"Potter," said Voldemort. Harry looked at him. "I believe you are aware of our connection through your scar."

Harry was stumped now, Voldemort was speaking to him. "Yes...." This had never happened before, he was talking to Voldemort.

"Have no doubt; I am communicating with you through this connection. The pain is nulled now, but only because I want it to-

"What do you want?" interrupted Harry. He felt a lot braver now he knew Voldemort wasn't really here and couldn't hurt him, he should have known better.

Voldemort's eye's blazed with anger for a moment. "You'd do well not to interrupt me again, Potter...." he said with a threatening tone in his voice.

"Why? What can you possibly do to me here?"

Voldemort surveyed Harry for a moment. Then with a quick flick of the wrist he raised his hand and clicked his fingers. Immediately Harry's head exploded with a fresh wave of pain, he collapsed to the floor in this white room. "I can control the pain in your scar while we are here, ever since discovering our connection last year I have strived to understand it better, to use it to my advantage."

Harry picked himself up off the floor. "Tell me what you want...."

"I have been more than generous over the years to you, Harry. I-"

Harry laughed. "Generous. You've murdered my entire family. You've tried to kill me on at least half a dozen separate occasions... you have not been generous."

Voldemort again seemed angry. "I will not tolerate another interruption. I have been generous; I have given you the chance to join me more than once. No one else has ever been given a second chance when I've offered them a position among the ranks of my Death Eaters."

Harry was no longer laughing. "You think that offering me more than once the chance to join your legion of loyal idiots is generous. I don't even know why you bothered offering in the first place. What would make you think that I would ever join you? You're a murderer, a killer. I hate you. I'd die before getting the Mark burned onto my arm."

Voldemort didn't say anything for a moment. "Yes... I have just accepted that. If you're not with me, Potter, you're against me. I will not offer again. Make no mistake though; I am going to kill you. But first I'm going to take away everyone you care about, one by one you will watch the people you love die. Watch them paying the ultimate price for being close to you. You are going to find out what it means to be your friend. I gave you a chance to save them, you chose to ignore it. They will die, the Weasley, the Mudblood, that fool Dumbledore. And finally, after everyone is dead. I will kill you... slowly. You will learn at the very end what happens to

those who stand up and fight against Lord Voldemort. Refusing my offer has been the mistake that will end all things for you."

Harry was angry; his voice was even when he spoke. "Voldemort.... shut up! I will no longer be intimidated by you. The rest of the god damn world may fear you but I no longer do. I have nothing left to fear, you took it all away. You have lost your biggest weapon against me. The people I love are safe at Hogwarts, I've seen to that." Harry stopped to catch his breath. But then he thought of something, a parting remark. "Last year at the Ministry, Voldemort, you tried to obtain a prophecy sphere that was foretold concerning me and you. Now I know what it said and trust me when I say this, I am going to kill you... and this time I'll make sure you stay dead. I've had enough. Over the years you've driven me to the edge and now you've just pushed me over it. ENOUGH!" Harry paused. The fury on the Dark Lord's face was tremendous. Harry was glad he had made him angry. "That said, Voldemort, if you don't mind, I'd like to leave."

Voldemort roared with anger and raised both his hands, Harry knew what was coming and braced himself for it. His scar erupted in the most pain he'd ever felt. Barely he felt another pain shoot up his back complete with a large, ominous breaking sound. He fell to the floor unable to move. All the while his scar burned/

Death would have been a release from the pain, maybe it was death; he couldn't tell? He felt his scar ripping at the seams and then blood falling down into his right eye. Harry closed his eyes and tried to block it out, but to no avail. The world around him grew dark and he knew nothing more.

Chapter 9 - Life

You only live once, but if you work it right, once is enough.

--Joe Lewis

"Do you know what happened, sir?" asked Hermione.

"Voldemort," was Dumbledore's one word answer.

It had been one day since Harry's collapse at the award ceremony, and Ron, Hermione, Padma and Dumbledore were sitting in chairs next to Harry's bed in St. Mungo's hospital. The sun shone brightly through the high window, but it couldn't lighten the mood in the room.

"Why won't he wake up?" asked Ron quietly. He hadn't spoken much in the past twelve hours, and who could blame him. When Harry had fallen at the podium, chaos had ensued. Ron and Hermione had rushed over to him, along with Dumbledore. When they reached him, he was screaming in pain and rolling around on the floor, once again his scar was bleeding. People were rushing here and there, clearly at a loss for what to do. Harry didn't stop screaming for a full five minutes before he jerked suddenly forward and a loud crack was heard, then he lay still. Fifteen minutes later he was rushed into St. Mungo's barely alive.

Hermione would never forget the way he looked when they levitated his stretcher away into the emergency ward, his face was as white as a sheet and half of it was covered in blood. As the Healers disappeared down the hall, she had heard a few garbled words of their communication: *'Not breathing.' Spine snapped in three places.'* *'Forehead bleeding heavily.'* *'Doesn't look good....'*

"Why won't he wake up?" repeated Ron.

Dumbledore sighed heavily and rubbed his temple with his fingers. "I do not know... perhaps he does not want to....?"

Ron stared absently around the room. It was a simple room with white walls and a single window looking out over the city of London. He and the others sat quietly in wooden chairs next to Harry in his bed. The silence was immense, suffocating. Ron glanced at Padma and for a moment realised that this was all new to her, Harry was all new to her. She sat nervously in her chair biting her fingernails, looking at Harry.

"There has got to be something the Healers can do?" said Hermione sharply and unexpectedly, rising from her chair. "Can't they revive

him...?"

"Every avenue has been exhausted. Spells and potions have absolutely no affect. It is simply a matter of when he decides to wake up...." Everyone in the room turned towards the door as this person spoke. It was the Healer assigned to Harry, a Madam Phelps. "Which could be today, tomorrow? Or never...."

Hermione sighed and covered her eyes with her hand before sitting down again. Padma, meanwhile, stared at Harry quietly. He was lying on his stomach, while the bone-set salve and bandages repaired the broken bones up and along his spine. His glasses had been removed and the scar on his forehead was blood red. The only sign he showed that he was actually alive was the slow rise and fall of his back as he breathed. *Breathing had to be a good sign....*

Padma felt out of place in this room. This was all new to her, she hadn't spent an awful lot of time worrying over the war or those who would fight it... and now... And now she realised that Harry had been fighting it most of his life and she'd been thrown along in there with him just recently. Harry had been through it all, she'd been through nothing, but had just got a taste of it.... and it had scared her. She felt out of place. Padma sighed and closed her eyes heavily, whilst silently, inside her head she repeated the same solemn mantra again and again: *please let him wake up, please let him wake up, please let him wake up....*

For in that sleep of death, what dreams may come.

--William Shakespeare Hamlet

The darkness was huge... It was set to consume him, but it didn't. Light shone through the dark from the stars overhead. The amazingly bright stars, millions of them, stretching on through the infinity that is our universe. Standing here in this mass of creation, Harry felt very small... and alone.

Where am I? he thought. Harry took a good look around himself and what he saw didn't encourage him. He appeared to be standing on some

sort of glass structure that was suspended in the air. Above, beneath and either side of him was the blanket of stars that the light was emanating from. All of this star-light seemed to be drawn to a point in the distance along this glass road that glowed immensely bright, like a huge door of light unbelievably remarkable against the darkness around it. Harry looked down the other side of this glass path and saw an enormous veil of darkness. He felt as if he was closer to the dark than to the light.

Harry felt compelled to walk along the glass until he reached this darkness. He had taken only a few steps when a voice behind him spoke.

"Harry..." the voice said quietly.

Harry froze and turned slowly, carefully. He knew this voice; it was the voice of a friend. He came face to face with the source of the voice and for a moment didn't say anything, but then... "Sirius," he said weakly.

"Ron," said Mrs. Weasley shrilly as she entered Harry's room and caught her youngest son in a breath taking hug. "Oh, Ron. Are you okay...?"

"I'm fine, Mum," he said quietly. "It's Harry you should worry about...."

Mrs. Weasley glanced at Harry in his bed and felt the wind get knocked out of her. He looked terrible. His face was all pale compared to the scar on his forehead that shone blood red like a beacon against the rest of his skin. His back was covered with bandages and a bone salve. It was hard to tell that he was even alive.

"Isn't Dumbledore here?" she asked Hermione.

"No... He left about an hour ago. Business to attend to... or something." Hermione gave her a look that said plainly he was away with the Order but couldn't say that in front of Padma, who was still sitting quietly in her chair.

Mrs. Weasley nodded with understanding. "Hello, dear," she now said to Padma. "I'm Ron's mother, Molly."

Padma smiled weakly and muttered a small greeting before turning back to Harry. Mrs. Weasley, meanwhile, sat down in the seat previously occupied by Dumbledore. No one said anything, no one wanted to say anything. The same thought was on all their minds. *What if he doesn't wake up...?*

The minutes ticked by with an agonising slowness. It felt like hours had passed but when Ron glanced at the clock, it had barely been five minutes since the last time he looked at it. It was painful just to sit here helpless while his best friend was so near death.

No one talked much for the rest of that afternoon. Mrs. Weasley left briefly to get a few cups of tea from the tearooms but that was it. Later in the day more familiar people came to visit Harry. There was Tonks, who wouldn't say where she had been the past month, Moody, and Mr. Weasley. They all took one look at Harry and fell silent, it didn't look good....

Hermione found the silence and the resigned looks on the faces of the members of the Order suffocating. She couldn't stay in this room. Without saying a word she left quietly and walked out into the corridor. The tears that she thought she'd kept hidden so well, started to roll down her face. Briefly, and not for the first time, Hermione wondered what it would have been like if she had never come to Hogwarts, if she wasn't a witch and had gone to a Muggle school. Never met Harry, or Ron. At times it seemed like bliss; at others she wouldn't have had her world any other way. She loved her friends and couldn't imagine life without them.

Hermione turned sharply when the door to Harry's room opened and closed quietly behind her. It was Ron. Without a word she threw herself into his arms and began to cry quietly into his shoulder. Ron, who hadn't expected this in the least, was momentarily stumped. But slowly and nervously he brought his arms around her and let a few silent tears roll down his own cheek. He felt as if he could stay like this forever...

"Hermione," he whispered.

"Hmm..." was the mumbled response from his shoulder.

"I -er- I...." Ron felt his mouth grow dry. He didn't say anything and this

caused Hermione to look up. Ron looked down into her brown eyes, which were slightly bloodshot from crying, and his mind drew a blank. Whatever he was going to say didn't matter now. What mattered was that Hermione was in his arms, and he was in hers. He continued to gaze into those tear stained eyes and he felt his world spin. Slowly, carefully, her eyes seemed to grow closer until they were all he could see. And then it happened, her lips connected with his for just a moment and then she broke away. A small touch and then it was gone. Ron, for use off a better word, was floored. He saw Hermione back away slowly, a hand on her lips, confusion in her eyes.

"Ron...."

Ron sighed. "Not now, Hermione... not now. We'll sort this out later; right now I think we should get back to Harry, in case he wakes up." It took Ron his all to say these words, but he knew he was right. *This wasn't the time*. He saw Hermione coming to the same conclusion and slowly remove her hand from her lips. Without saying another word to eachother, the two of them returned to their seats in Harry's room.

Is death the last sleep? No--it is the last and final awakening.

--Sir Walter Scott

"Sirius," he said weakly. "Sirius... how... where...?"

Sirius Black smiled and threw back his head and let out a bark of laughter. "I didn't expect to see you here so soon, Harry?"

Harry was silent and fearful. He looked round at the amazing universe around him in wonder; wonder because he was wondering if this was real. Was any of it real...? Was this all a big joke and soon someone might jump out and yell 'surprise'. Harry rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand and for a moment realised he wasn't wearing his glasses, though he could see perfectly.

"Sirius... you are really-"

"I'm here, Harry. Though as I said, I didn't expect you to be here so

soon? It's not how it's supposed to be...." Sirius looked at him sadly. This wasn't right....

"Wha- What are you talking about?" said Harry shakily.

"Do you know where you are, Harry?"

Harry shook his head slowly. It looked like Sirius, it sounded like Sirius, but Sirius was dead. "No...."

His godfather smiled. "You're standing on the bridge between life and death, Harry."

"I'm dead!" shouted Harry.

Sirius shook his head. "This is kind of a... waypoint for lost souls. Those who haven't died, but are close to death, sometimes end up here. As I said before you shouldn't be here, it's not your time. There is still so much you have to do...."

"Sirius, I don't- This is unbelievable...."

"You just have to believe me, Harry, when I say you have to go back."

"Back where? To life...?"

Sirius smiled. "Exactly, Harry."

"How....?"

"This bridge we're on. One way leads to death, the other life. It's not hard to guess which one is which."

Harry nodded. This was amazing, but he nodded. "Why are you here, Sirius?" he whispered.

"You're closer to death than you know, Harry. I am here because of that. You see that light in the distance." Sirius pointed to the extraordinary well of light. "That is life. And see the darkness over there.... that way leads to death."

Harry suddenly felt very angry. This was a trick, some kind of cruel joke... it had to be. "Sir- Whoever you are I don't believe this... it can't be...."

Sirius smiled calmly. "Accept it, Harry. Acceptance will be the first step back into life."

"I don't think you understand, Mr. Weasley. It is not in our power to revive him. There is absolutely nothing I or anyone else can do," stated Madam Phelps.

Ron sighed in exasperation. "Wh- Why can't you revive him?"

"We don't know? There has never been a similar case like this in known history. It's as if the lights are on but nobody's home. His body is physically fine, but it's as if there's no consciousness in there. Nothing to revive, nobody to revive. Whatever makes Harry Potter, Harry Potter... is not there."

"Then where the hell is he?" shouted Ron.

"That," said Madam Phelps, "is anyone's guess...."

Madam Phelps finished removing the bandages from Harry's back and turned to leave. The salve had worked its magic and his spine was repaired to a certain extent. As long as Harry stayed off it for the next day it would be fine, and it appeared that Harry would be off it a lot longer than that. The Healer gave one last hopeless glance at Harry, and left.

Hermione's silence was equalled only by Padma's. She had barely strung two words together since they had arrived at the hospital. Hermione put it down to fear. She was scared, scared that Harry could die, they all feared that...

What Madam Phelps had said, *Harry not being Harry....?* That was new, different. Something to keep the medical staff busy. It was just like Harry to break the rules on medical magic. They had been re-writing the rule book ever since he survived the killing curse. And that itself was an amazing achievement. *But no thought Hermione he wouldn't die... he couldn't die. Harry would come back, death wasn't for him.*

"I'm starving," said Ron suddenly, holding his stomach.

Hermione smiled to herself. That was Ron, the Ron she had grown to love. No matter what the occasion his stomach always interfered. *That was Ron... Ron who she had kissed... Not now.* "Here," she said with a quick flick of her wand. A plate of biscuits appeared on the small wooden table in between there chairs.

Ron jumped on them. "Blimey, Hermione. Where'd you learn that?" mumbled Ron through a mouthful of biscuit.

"Been doing some early study for NEWTs," she said simply. "Do you want a biscuit, Padma?"

Padma looked over to her slowly and shook her head silently. "No, thanks...."

Hermione nodded and then turned back to Ron, who seemed to be lost in thought. "What is it?" she asked.

"What if- What if he never comes back....?" Ron practically whispered this.

Hermione hesitated a moment. "He has to come back," she finally said. "He has to...."

Everything you do is triggered by an emotion of either desire or fear.

--Brian Tracy

"Accept it, Harry. Accept that I am truly here and that you are standing on the edge of the abyss. One step left or right could be the decision between life and death."

Harry remained impassive. When he spoke he spoke quietly, his voice even, cold. "Say that it is true... what are you here for?"

"I've come to guide you back, Harry. This isn't your time."

Harry scoffed. "Well we'd better get going then, hadn't we?"

Sirius ignored the sarcasm and began to walk towards the light in the distance. Harry fell into step beside him. "Why is this so hard for you to

believe, Harry?" asked Sirius as they walked.

"Maybe because I'm talking to you when you're supposed to be dead? Or maybe it's because you told me I'm nearly dead? Or maybe it's because of this whole place I'm in? Take your pick?"

Sirius didn't say anything for a moment. "I'm sorry I died, Harry. I truly am...."

Harry sighed and without realising he was doing it, rubbed his scar with the back of his hand. "Don't be... It wasn't your fault. It was- It was Lestrage and Voldemort...."

"Yeah...." said Sirius bitterly. "Voldemort...."

Neither of them spoke for a moment and they continued to walk in silence. Eventually Harry did. "...I have to kill him, Sirius...."

"You're scared?" he said.

Harry glared at him even though he knew it was true. "Wouldn't you be if you had to kill Voldemort? If it was your job to do it and there was absolutely nothing you could do about it? Defeat the most powerful dark wizard that ever lived. There is nothing I can do to change it, nothing. I wasn't given a choice."

"That shouldn't-"

"Listen, Sirius. Listen very carefully. I don't want this, I don't want it. But no matter how hard I try to get away from it, I can't. I am scared. Scared of failing, scared of letting Voldemort win. And what's worse at other times I think 'why not?' Why not just end it and let Voldemort be someone else's problem.... I can't take it...." Harry was practically shouting by the time he'd finished.

Sirius stopped walking and grabbed his godson by the shoulder. His hand slipped right through, they couldn't connect. Sirius ignored this and spoke anyway. "Harry, the world needs you, they need you. You may not know it, but the wizarding world looks up to you. They see you as a ray of hope shining through in all the darkness. You can't take that away from them... I know it's not fair, life rarely is. But you have to fight... you have

to. Because if you don't, who will...?"

Sunday the 17th, one of the longest days Hermione could ever remember, was drawing to a close. It was coming up eight o'clock and she, Ron, and Padma had now spent fifteen hours next to Harry in his bed. To say they were tired was an understatement. Ron was snoring loudly in his corner, Padma was still awake but her eyes were heavy. Hermione was barely keeping her eyes open.

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley had promised to return and take them to Grimmauld place at nine o'clock, only an hour away. But Hermione didn't think she would make it that long. In fact, ten minutes later she was asleep.

Padma sighed heavily as she stared at Harry for the millionth time that day. God he looked terrible. He was still pale and his scar still shone blood red against his skin. She glanced at Ron and Hermione and saw that they'd fallen asleep. Slowly, carefully, she moved her chair closer to Harry and grasped his hand in her own. *This wasn't fair* she thought. *He doesn't deserve this, no one does.* His hand was stone cold, but as she held it it started to warm.

As Padma sat there quietly, she found herself staring at the long vertical bruise that ran up the length of his back. "Harry," she whispered quietly, "wake up, Harry."

Harry didn't move, he didn't do anything, he hardly breathed. Padma let a silent tear roll down her face. *How could this happen...* Padma wasn't sure when it happened; all she could remember was closing her eyes and then sleep took her.

About half an hour later the door to Harry's room opened and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley entered. They took one look around at the sleeping forms of Ron, Hermione and Padma, Padma still holding Harry's hand, and let them be. It would be better not to wake them up.

"Let's leave them, Molly," whispered Mr. Weasley.

"...Okay...."

The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.

--Edmund Burke

The light was growing ever closer. Harry and Sirius walked towards it with a purpose. Harry thought strongly that he would go back, had to go back; he was a fool to think he could take the easy choice above the right choice. That wasn't his way.

"We're almost there, Harry," said Sirius quietly.

Harry nodded. They were a good deal closer to the well of star light; it was huge when once it had been small from a distance. "How? How do I get back?"

"I don't know," said Sirius with a sudden jerk of his body. He stumbled back but didn't fall.

"What was that?"

"I- I'm not sure?" Sirius walked forward and again his 'body' was jerked violently back. He stared ahead for a moment but then a look of understanding spread across his face. He raised his left hand and swung it down through the air. It seemed to stop halfway down, though nothing was pushing against it. "Ah. Well I should have expected this...." he said solemnly.

"What...?"

"I can't go any further, Harry. This is as close as I can get to life." He pointed towards the light. "I'm dead, I can't go there."

Harry was quiet. A million and one different emotions surging through him; anger, love, fear, loss.... "This is goodbye then...." he eventually muttered.

A pained look passed over his godfather's face. "Yes, Harry. You have to go the rest of the way yourself. But you'll do all right. You're very independent...." Sirius' voice trailed away.

"Do you... do you think I'll ever see you again?"

"Nothing is impossible, Harry. I want you to remember that, you'll need it. Nothing and I mean nothing is impossible...." He paused and smiled affectionately at Harry. "We will meet again, a teenager can defeat the Dark Lord, and you're more powerful than you know." Sirius said this with such force that Harry felt taken back. He could tell that Sirius believed what he was saying one hundred percent.

"I'll remember, Sirius...."

His godfather nodded and then let out a bark of laughter. "Goodbye, Harry," was the last thing he said before his image slowly faded and disappeared completely. Leaving Harry quite alone on the bridge of souls.

Harry didn't know how long he stood there staring at the place Sirius had last stood, but eventually he turned away and continued towards the light of life. After five minutes he arrived at the end of the bridge. It just ended in the middle of the air. Harry saw the light below the edge and up above it as far as he could see.

What do I do he thought. "Jump," said a little voice in his head that sounded like someone he knew but couldn't place. "Jump."

Why the hell not? thought Harry, he had nothing to lose. And jump he did. Closing his eyes tightly Harry jumped off the edge of the bridge and into the light. No hesitation, no fear, no nothing. Just a fall.... and then an immense feeling of life, all the while Sirius's last words echoed in his mind; "Nothing is impossible...."

*Ron woke first the next morning of Monday the 18th. A quick glance at his watch showed him it was eight thirty. He looked first at Harry and saw Padma holding his hand, her head lying lazily on his bed. Harry was still out of it. He then glanced at Hermione and saw her slouched in her chair, her hair obscuring most of her face. *That kiss* he thought. *Did I dream it...? Not now....**

With a yawn he stretched his aching limbs and decided to go get a cup of

tea. Ron left the room and walked casually through the empty, early morning halls of St. Mungo's. Ten minutes later he came back bearing three cups of tea, he didn't know if Hermione or Padma would be awake, but he could reheat the tea for them if they weren't.

When Ron returned to the room, he didn't expect to see someone else there, standing over Harry. "Ethan...?" he said curiously. "What are you doing here?"

Rafe looked up and stared at Ron for a moment. As far as Ron knew, Ethan had gone back to Hogwarts the night of Harry's collapse. "I came to see how he was doing," he finally said honestly.

Ron nodded, though he was still confused. He briefly glanced at the still sleeping, unmoving forms of Hermione and Padma. "How'd you get here?" asked Ron, placing the tea on the bedside table and offering Ethan a cup which he declined.

Again Ethan paused before answering. "Just a little trick I know...." He was talking about Apparation, but Ron wasn't to know that. "What's wrong with, Harry?"

Ron considered Ethan for a moment but eventually let the issue lie. "Nothing physically," he sighed. "But he just won't wake up. It's as if he's not there...."

Ethan shook his head. "I've never heard of anything like that before...."

"Neither have the Healers in this place," said Ron. "It's got everyone stumped."

"Well, give it time, I suppose," mumbled Ethan walking towards the door. "As long as he can play Quidditch on Saturday," he added reaching the door.

"Are you going already?" asked Ron.

Ethan surveyed Ron for a moment. "I've got to go... check on a few things."

Without further explanation Ethan left, robes billowing out behind him.

There's something about him thought Ron as he watched him go. *Something he's hiding....*

His thoughts were soon forgotten though as Hermione awoke. She yawned and stretched and then finally looked at Ron. A moment passed in awkward silence, neither forgetting the previous night's events. Ron least of all.

"Tea?" he asked her quietly.

She stared nervously, her feelings mixed. "Ron...."

"Yes," said Ron quickly and eagerly.

"...do you.... have... any *feelings* for me...?" This was practically whispered. Ron had to strain to hear it.

Without hesitation and with a courage surprising even himself, he answered. "Yes. For about two years now. How... how do you feel...?"

Hermione blinked and didn't say anything for a moment. Ron felt his heart sink to his stomach. But then she smiled and that told Ron all he needed to know. He thought nothing, absolutely nothing could stop him from rushing over to Hermione and wrapping his arms around her, he was wrong.

Ron had barely moved two steps when an amazing scream filled the room. He immediately turned to Harry in time to see Padma wake up suddenly and fall backwards off her chair, but that wasn't what kept his attention. Harry continued to scream and then started thrashing around on his bed. He closed his mouth, the screaming ended and he lay still. And then he moved and opened his mouth again, Ron had expected a scream, more thrashing, what happened was very different. An unbelievably bright white light shot out of his mouth and hovered above him for a moment. The light spread and soon encased his entire body, nothing of Harry was visible and only a thin white outline remained.

Hermione screamed as did Padma, but Ron didn't move. He was in shock. *What the hell was happening...?* "Get help," he cried to Hermione and Padma. Ron had to turn away from where he knew Harry to be now because the light had grown so bright it was almost blinding. Hermione

and Padma couldn't or wouldn't move. Ron was about to go himself when something happened and he knew everything was going to be all right.

At the exact moment when Ron thought it couldn't possibly get any worse, and that this light was going to kill Harry, a wondrous sound filled the air. He'd heard it a few times.... *Phoenix song*.

He shielded his eyes slightly and turned back to the light. It was growing hotter and he could feel an immense heat coming from it. Whatever this stuff was, he could tell he'd do well not to touch it. The phoenix song was coming from the light and it made Ron feel that the light was a good thing. He chanced another look at Hermione and Padma; they were all right, though looked a little scared. Hermione had pulled Padma back against the wall.

Ron's attention was brought back to Harry when he heard the Phoenix song getting weaker. It was still there, but a lot less loud. The light also seemed to be fading. Ron turned away again when the door to the room burst open and was wrenched of its hinges, flying into the wall barely half a meter from Ron's head.

Into the room walked the powerful presence of Albus Dumbledore. He took one look at Harry and then in turn turned to Ron, Hermione and Padma. As he did the light casing around Harry faded away almost to nothing, but Harry himself still wasn't visible.

"What happened," said Dumbledore quickly, unease in his voice.

Padma spoke first. "He- Harry just started.... glowing. Though it's almost gone now."

Ron and Hermione nodded in agreement but Dumbledore still looked uneasy. Ron moved over the room towards a shocked looking Hermione. He placed an arm around her shoulders but that was all. It wasn't until then that he noticed a small buzzing in his ears. It was growing louder.

Dumbledore heard the buzzing to and looked quickly at Harry, and for the first time since Ron and Hermione had known him, the most powerful light-wizard in the world looked frightened. He raised his hand and

muttered a few words that none of them could hear. Almost instantly Dumbledore withdrew his hand as if bitten and the look of fear increased.

When it happened, it happened fast. Dumbledore cried and jumped in front of Ron, Hermione, and Padma. Casting shield charms and other defensive spells with his wand as he went. At the same time that the light surrounding Harry returned with renewed force. This time it glowed amazingly bright and the phoenix song was nearly deafening. But that wasn't the worst.... sharp bolts of the white light spewed forth from the core, where Harry supposedly was. The bolts hit everything, walls, windows, cupboards, chairs, and Dumbledore's shields. The window exploded into a thousand shards of glass as a bolt came into contact with it. The walls were almost instantly pockmarked with long scars and burns, they were on fire but luckily they held. The tables and chairs were obliterated into nothing but dust.

Dumbledore was not faring much better, but thankfully there was a very good reason he had been given the title as the greatest wizard of the age. His shield charms held, and protected the four of them but Hermione could tell it was an incredible strain on the old man. She watched as Dumbledore raised his hands to keep the charms steady. Beads of sweat began to pour down his face and after a moment he fell to one knee. The shields were glowing faintly blue and sometimes flickered as if they were going to collapse, but the constant barrage of white bolts from the bed seemed endless.

Every part of the room, except the parts protected by Dumbledore's shields, was completely and utterly destroyed. But Ron could tell that Dumbledore couldn't give out much longer. His fears were confirmed when one of Dumbledore's arms fell limply to his side. This caused the shields to flicker for a longer period of time and a bolt flew through. Instinctively Ron pulled on Hermione's and Padma's robes and the three of them fell to the floor, the bolt missing Padma's falling form by an inch.

They landed hard on their backs but Ron kept his eyes trained on Dumbledore. The old wizard forced his arm back up into place and the charm was restored to its full strength. Bolt after bolt hit the thin shields but Dumbledore didn't falter again. After a few minutes, though it

seemed much longer, the light subsided and the bolts ceased. Ron, Hermione and Padma breathed a heavy sigh of relief, and Dumbledore lowered his arms and took down the shields, it was over.

Dumbledore turned and looked at each of them in turn; satisfied that they were uninjured he turned slowly towards Harry. What met his eyes wasn't pretty. The light had subsided and disappeared, leaving a pale looking Harry on the bed, which was on fire in several places. A quick glance around the room told him that there were a lot of little fires around the place.

He took only one step forward when three Healers ran into the room, fear and bewilderment etched all over their faces. Madam Phelps was at their lead. She opened her mouth once or twice before finally saying something. "What....?"

"Not now," said Dumbledore sharply. "Help put out the fires." Ron, Hermione and Padma were all already running around the room, putting out fires here and there before they got out of control, not that it really mattered. The room was destroyed beyond recognition.

The Healers did as they were told and soon the fires were out, but the walls of the room creaked uncertainly, as if they could collapse any moment. Dumbledore thought just this, and quickly levitated Harry with a quick flick of his wand, and beckoned the others to follow him. He moved down the hall with the limp form of Harry floating in front of him. When he passed an empty, unused room he entered it and placed Harry carefully on the bed.

Ron, Hermione, and Padma entered it, though somewhat cautiously, as if Harry could explode again. Dumbledore didn't seem to be worried that it could happen again, and he told them so. Madam Phelps entered a few minutes later; she looked to be at a loss for anything else to do.

"Should I- should I examine him?" she asked.

Dumbledore shook his head. "No... There is nothing we can do for him. He is beyond normal magic."

Madam Phelps left without another word, clearly relieved that she didn't

have to examine Harry just yet. Meanwhile, Dumbledore placed a hand across Harry's forehead. Hermione noticed that he did not touch the lightning bolt scar.

Dumbledore had barely removed his hand before Harry sat up quickly and his eyes opened suddenly. He looked around himself for a moment and then fell back down, his eyes coming to rest on Dumbledore. Harry raised his arm and grasped the headmasters shoulder. "Nothing is impossible...." he whispered before falling back and closing his eyes.

Harry slept most of that morning. Dumbledore told Ron, Hermione and Padma that it was because he was exhausted. He also explained what the white light was.

"You see," he said. "What we witnessed was magic in its purest form. Pure, white, powerful magic. Magic in its natural form, unused by anyone. Few have ever seen it and few believe it truly exists. Harry has once again rewritten the rule book." Dumbledore smiled gently to himself, but Ron could see that he looked troubled.

"What else is there, though?" he asked.

Dumbledore's smile faded. "The magic entered Harry, it became part of him. And in turn, he part of it. He had a huge amount of it already;" *the power the Dark Lord knows not* thought Dumbledore, but didn't say this. "This will increase his magical power quite significantly...."

"That's good, isn't it?" said Padma, mirroring Hermione's thoughts.

"Perhaps...." answered Dumbledore thoughtfully.

Their conversation ended as Harry stirred and groaned. Slowly he opened his eyes and took in his surroundings. "Where...?" he croaked when he saw the blurred images of people in front of him.

"St. Mungo's, Harry," said a familiar voice at the same time someone placed his glasses over his eyes.

His vision became clear and he recognised the people around him. There was Hermione and Ron to his left, Padma at the foot of his bed, and Dumbledore to the right. "Where am I?" his voice croaked in his

throat as he spoke.

"St. Mungo's," repeated Padma.

This time Harry nodded. Slowly but surely his senses were returning to their full strength. *What happened?* he thought *how... why am I here?* "Why... am I here?"

"You collapsed, Harry," said Dumbledore. "At the awards ceremony. That was two days ago."

Harry now remembered that. He remembered standing at the podium and then his scar exploding with pain and then his 'discussion' with Voldemort. He'd argued, enraged the Dark Lord and had payed for it dearly at the end. *But what happened after that....?*

"How am I doing...?"

"You are physically fine, Harry," said Dumbledore. "Though there are... difficulties."

"Such as?"

"Nothing to worry about now. Tell us, what did you see while you wee asleep?"

Harry opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. *Where had I been....? There was something....* He thought about this but then something else struck him as odd. "Why didn't Voldemort kill me...?" he directed this question towards Dumbledore.

The headmaster sighed. "I've pieced together as much as I can, Harry. I believe he attacked you through your scar?" Harry nodded and Dumbledore continued. "Occlumency would have help-"

Harry cut him off. "No it wouldn't. What happened between us was.... deeper than occlumency. He was reading or planting thoughts in my mind. He was there and so was I. We talked and... Well things took a turn for the worse and, and he could control the pain on my scar. He could've killed me, though it appears that I am still alive."

Dumbledore nodded. "It was very close; the Healers said that your heart

did stop beating for a time. But I don't think Voldemort intended to kill you now?"

Harry shook his head. "No... He has," Harry glanced at his three friends as he said this, "other plans before he tries to kill me." Voldemort wanted them dead first.

Harry could tell that Dumbledore understood his meaning. "I also believe that he would think it unwise to kill you this early in the war. Now that everyone's hope is restored in you after the dementor attack in Diagon Alley."

"What- Why?"

"Think about it, Harry. I know you don't like to hear it, but you *are* a hero. What was Voldemort going to do? Promote you to martyr? I do not think so. Your death would cause anger throughout the world and Voldemort would risk turning our quest to defeat him into a crusade. The Light-side would fight with renewed ferocity if you were to die; Voldemort isn't strong enough to challenge that yet." Dumbledore blinked as he said this. "Though the time is coming...."

Harry sighed and then turned to his friends. They had been quiet while he and Dumbledore had spoken. "And how are you three?" he asked, his gaze mainly on Padma who looked a little worse for the wear.

"Tired," admitted Ron honestly. "You've got to stop putting us through this, mate," he finished with a small laugh. Hermione nodded vigorously.

Harry looked at Padma and saw that she was smiling slightly, with what looked like extreme relief. "Harry, I," she began but then stopped. Without another word she threw her arms around him and leaned on his chest. Harry, caught by surprise, didn't react at first but then placed his arms around her. After a moment he saw her blush and then look sheepishly up at Dumbledore.

The headmaster had the familiar small lines of amusement around his face and a raised eyebrow. Padma coughed slightly and then sat up. "Do you remember where you were, Harry?" asked Dumbledore a minute later. "The Healers believe that you may have been experiencing

something beyond our grasp while you were asleep, do you remember anything?"

Harry blinked and then shook his head. "No...."

"You woke up earlier, Harry and said one thing; '*Nothing is impossible*'. Do you know why you would have said that?"

Harry, whose strength was rapidly returning, sat up and frowned. Those words '*nothing is impossible*' had triggered something in his mind. *What was it...*? He felt the answer on the tip of his tongue, in the back of his mind but couldn't remember for the life of him. For some reason he knew he had to remember those words, though. "I haven't a clue?" His voice cracked when he said this and the croakiness disappeared. His voice returned to normal.

Dumbledore sighed and nodded. "Do tell me if you remember anything." Harry nodded and promised he would.

Harry spent the rest of the day catching up on all the information he'd missed the past two days. Nothing had been seen nor heard of Voldemort or his Death Eaters. Harry was touched at how many people visited him while he was unconscious and was not so pleased to hear that the Daily Prophet, along with several other papers, had reporters camped on the first floor of the hospital, waiting to hear news of him.

But what shocked him, scared him, and amazed him, was the recount of the morning's events, namely his explosion in the room down the hall. When Ron, Hermione, and Padma went to get some lunch, Dumbledore remained behind and told him his theory about the *power the dark lord knows not*. Harry accepted it, it made sense. Though he was still scared by the power amount of power that he possessed and what it could do if he wasn't able to control it. He spoke none of this to Dumbledore; he'd cover this one himself.

Harry spent the rest of the day regaining his strength. A woman named Madam Phelps examined him late in the afternoon and said that she could find nothing wrong with him, he had a clean bill of health for which he was very thankful.

After many visits (mostly from Weasley's) Harry asked everyone to leave for an hour while he showered and sorted himself out. It had been three days since his last true wash and shave, and he felt dirty and hairy. When he stepped out of the shower, Harry felt a small twinge of pain in his back. He stood in front of the mirror, which was opposite another mirror. So if he looked in the first one he could see his back in the one behind him. He winced when he saw the deep purple bruising and a long, vertical scar that ran up his spine.

Sighing, Harry turned away from the mirror. He looked at the hospital clothes that he had been wearing and decided that something new was needed. The hospital supplied a simple blue smock that wasn't at all comfortable. He realised he didn't have his wand but wasn't deterred. Harry raised his arm and pointed it at the hospital smock. With a quick flick of his wrist and a thought the smock transformed into a black shirt and jeans.

Harry was surprised that it had worked so well. He had expected the transfiguration to be a lot harder, the fact that it wasn't unnerved him slightly. His magic felt different. Harry put on the clothes and exited the bath room. His room was empty and Harry didn't feel like company at that moment anyway. He walked over to the window and looked out in the dying light at the streets of Muggle London.

His thoughts were dark as he followed the progress of a small family up the street beneath him. A man and woman with their child, they looked happy. His mind flicked back to the scar on his back, and of course he had thought about one scar so he thought about the others as well. Harry made a list. There was the one on his forehead obviously, the most recent one on his back. He thought a little harder and remembered the one that Wormtail had given him. He lifted the sleeve a little on his black polo shirt and there it was. *Blood of the enemy*. And then the other big one was on his leg where Bellatrix had hit him with that curse back in September.

Harry sighed and rested his head against the glass of the window; he wondered how many more he would have before this war was over. And whether or not he would be alive to worry about them. A brief image of Sirius briefly passed through his mind and again Harry had the feeling

that he'd forgotten something. Whatever it was he'd remember it in time.
Nothing is impossible.

"Nagini," hissed Voldemort. The huge snake slithered out of the darkness and circled her master's feet. All the while a nervous looking man stared apprehensively at the snake. Voldemort said more in Parseltongue but Wormtail couldn't understand it so he paid more attention to the snake.

After Voldemort finished Nagini hissed and slithered away, clearly with a task to complete. Meanwhile Voldemort was staring at Wormtail, who couldn't hold his gaze for long and soon looked down.

"Do we know anything of Potter's condition?" It wasn't a question; if Pettigrew didn't have an answer it would be painful.

"Y- Yes," he squeaked.

"Well!" shouted Voldemort impatiently. "What of it?"

"He lives, my Lord." Wormtail said this quietly, not wanting to anger Voldemort. And if there was one sure way to anger him it was to mention Potter.

"Fear not, Wormtail. Lord Voldemort does not punish those who are honest in their answers." Wormtail relaxed a bit, but was still understandably nervous. "He lives," mused Voldemort. "Well that is to be expected. I would expect no less of Potter."

Wormtail stood to attention like the good, loyal Death Eater he was. Since his rebirth, Wormtail had been amongst the highest Death Eater circles. The Dark Lord's reward for helping him return to a body. And now he was sometimes privy to Voldemort's most secret plans. He had grown used to the new power he wielded among the ranks of the Death Eater's, if truth be told he considered himself Voldemort's right hand man. And he wasn't foolish enough to throw it all away with a lie.

"Wormtail," said Voldemort suddenly. "We must fulfil my promise to Mr. Potter. I'm giving you this task."

"Thank you, my Lord," Pettigrew said automatically. Whatever it was, murder, destruction, terror, torture; he would do it, to refuse was death.

Harry returned to Hogwart's on Thursday the 21st of November. The Healers had tested him continuously over the week and had failed to find a single thing wrong with him; he was released in full health. Ron, Hermione and Padma had returned two days previously and Harry was looking forward to getting back to what he felt was normal in his life, school.

It had just gone one thirty when he and Tonks stepped off the steps of the big purple Knight bus, saying goodbye to Stan. Tonks had lime green hair today and bright pink eyes.

"Here we are, Harry," she said happily, her hands on her hips, looking up at the castle. "Let's get inside."

Harry and Tonks entered the castle. The entrance hall was deserted, as everybody would be in lessons at this time. The two of them climbed the stairs but at the top they had to go different ways, Harry to his class, Tonks to Dumbledore. Harry said his goodbyes and thanks and headed off up the staircases to Defence Against the Dark Arts.

When he arrived, Malfoy and Neville were returning to their seats. Moody had obviously had them duel, and not surprisingly, Malfoy had won. Neville was rubbing his chest and sighing heavily.

"Potter," growled Moody. "Glad to have you back. Take your seat."

Harry nodded. "Glad to be back," he said truthfully and took the empty seat near the back next to Ethan.

"Right," said Moody. "Next we'll have Patil, Parvati and Longbottom. Get back up there, Longbottom." Neville nodded glumly and rose from his seat.

"How are you, Harry?" asked Rafe once the duel had begun and they couldn't be overheard.

"Fine," he replied. "Bit of a sore back, but that's just from the bruising."

Rafe nodded. "You'll play Quidditch on Saturday?"

Harry had forgotten about the match against Hufflepuff this Saturday. But of course he'd play. "Yeah I'll play. Take a lot more than a broken spine to stop me playing Quidditch."

Ethan laughed. "That's good. But what about," he lowered his voice to a whisper, "Apparation. You're almost there, a bit more practice and you'll have it down."

Harry nodded. "After the match. We'll go to the Shack."

The morning of the Quidditch match dawned bright and early. Katie had had the team out for one last practice last night, and Harry was confident that they could win. At the table in the Great Hall, Katie made sure that they all got a good breakfast before marching them down to the pitch half an hour early.

After the team changed into their robes, Katie decided that everyone should do a few laps around the pitch to check out the conditions, everyone agreed. While the rest of the team took off together, Harry, Ron and Ethan flew slowly behind them, talking seriously about the conditions and visibility they could expect. It was a cloudy day and it was threatening to rain, but that also meant that the sun wouldn't get in their eyes.

In what seemed to be no time at all, the stands were filled and the Gryffindor team was waiting to fly back out onto the pitch. When the entire school was seated above them, the doors flung open and they flew out. Forming their line, Harry saw Katie shake hands with the Hufflepuff captain. It was friendly; this would be a good, fun game. Not if they were playing Slytherin, though.

Madam Hooch looked up at them, recited a few of the main rules and then released the all the balls. Immediately the game began.

The Hufflepuff chaser caught the Quaffle and was soon zooming off towards Ron on the goals. His fellow chasers falling in line next to him. Harry immediately fell in to his routine and flew high into the air, higher

than most Bludgers could reach him anyway, and began scanning the pitch for the Snitch.

He saw out of the corner of his eye, the Hufflepuff chasers were almost on top of Ron. He wondered what the Beaters were up to letting them get that close? He saw the problem instantly. The Hufflepuff beaters had already beaten them to the Bludgers and were hitting them towards Ginny, Lavender, and Katie; stopping them from getting near the Quaffle.

The Hufflepuff chasers reached Ron and quickly passed the ball between themselves to confuse him. Harry hoped he would stop it; otherwise he would lose his confidence and miss more saves. Thankfully, when it was thrown, he did save it and instantly passed it to Lavender. Harry realised he'd been watching the game for too long and began searching for the snitch. He saw the Hufflepuff Seeker, a very timid looking second year girl, trailing him nervously. Ignoring her he scanned up and down the pitch, though he was distracted when a shout went up from the crowd and a voice rang clear through the air.

"AND THAT'S TEN NOTHING TO GRYFFINDOR!" shouted Seamus Finnegan, who had taken over Lee Jordan's commentary position. "AND IT'S DAVINSON WITH THE QUAFFLE- OOHOO! I BET THAT HURT. NICE BLUDGER THERE FROM THE NEW GRYFFINDOR BEATER, ETHAN RAFE."

Harry turned away again and continued his search for the elusive golden ball. He decided to fly lower in hopes of a bit better visibility. The Hufflepuff seeker followed his example. No sooner had he flown down, that a bludger cut across his path causing him to spin on his broom to avoid it. But as he did there was a flash of gold out of the corner of his eye, but it was gone a moment later; leaving Harry to wonder if he had seen the Snitch at all.

"AND THAT'S TEN FOR HUFFLEPUFF," shouted Seamus. Harry looked up to see Ron throw the ball to Katie, whilst cursing himself for not saving the shot. He needn't have worried.

Over the next fifteen minutes Gryffindor scored another six times, whilst Hufflepuff only scored once. Bringing the score to 70-20. Apart from that

one quick glimpse earlier, the Snitch hadn't shown itself and Harry was getting annoyed. The small Hufflepuff seeker had decided to search on her own, and if she got it before Harry, Gryffindor would still lose no matter how many goals they had scored.

Harry successfully dodged two consecutive Bludgers and soared higher into the sky to escape a third. He shot across the pitch above the Gryffindor chasers as they tossed the Quaffle between them. He wheeled around the goalposts and nodded to Ron as he passed. That was when he saw it. Hovering near the goalpost on the other side of the pitch was the golden Snitch.

He looked up quickly and saw the Hufflepuff seeker half the pitch away; she was a lot closer and would beat Harry to it if he wasn't careful. He tried to fly casually up the pitch, but his eyes never left the golden ball. He passed the beaters of both teams and the chasers of Hufflepuff. After flying innocently passed their Seeker, Harry put on a burst of speed and dived towards the goalpost.

It was all over three seconds later. Harry flew back up into the air, Snitch in hand and the crowd exploded with cheers. Harry landed and his team mates did the same soon after and congratulated him. They shook hands with the Hufflepuffs and made their way out of the stadium. As always, Harry got swept up in the crowd of Gryffindor's as they walked back up to the castle, separating him from Ron.

Though, it wasn't that bad because it swept him over to Padma, whom he'd only seen twice since he'd got back on Thursday. "Harry," she said smiling when he tapped her on the shoulder. "Well done, I was cheering for Gryffindor of course."

"Of course," he said with a grin. Harry took her hand in his and they walked back up to the castle in the throng of students.

They decided to stay outside the castle and talk for a bit before going back inside and returning to their respective common rooms. After most people had left, a few were still scattered around the grounds, Harry and Padma sat alone on the steps outside the entrance and talked quietly.

Harry, who was still very high on adrenaline from the Quidditch, felt

brave after a few minutes of conversation and leaned over and kissed her quickly. She responded immediately, as if she'd been waiting for him, and returned the favour. They sat there for a few minutes, undisturbed, they talked, kissed a little more; Harry savoured every minute of it. This was one of those rare moments where Harry enjoyed his life. No fights, no wars, no death, no pain. Nothing but happiness... which he felt he'd earned through it all.

"Harry," said a voice from behind him.

Harry turned and located the source of the voice. It was Ethan. "What do you want, Ethan?"

"Do you remember we have to go do that *thing*," said Ethan, mindful of Padma. Apparation couldn't be spoken in front of anyone; it was a major breach of the law, but a justifiable one.

Harry sighed. "Oh yeah..." He looked at Padma. "Sorry... but I do have to go...."

Padma nodded. "It's okay...."

Harry wasn't convinced. He knew he hadn't been the model boyfriend that he'd wanted to be, or that he felt that she deserved. If anything he had been as unpredictable as a Snitch, it was amazing she put up with him. "I won't be too long, I'll come find you in a few hours, okay?"

She smiled. "I'd like that."

Harry kissed her quickly once and walked with her back into the castle. He said goodbye a final time, and then turned and walked back outside. Ethan had already begun walking towards the secret entrance under the willow and Harry had to jog to catch up with him.

Ethan nodded as Harry fell into step but didn't say anything. They walked in silence the rest of the way and Rafe didn't say anything until they were in the tunnel beneath the grounds. "You might be able to do it today, Harry. That is, if you want too?"

"I do... it's just..."

"What?"

Harry didn't say anything for a moment. He wanted to ask Ethan about his past, about where he'd come from. He didn't know much about him except his name, and Harry had to know if he was to be trusted. So far he'd been rather too trusting with Rafe, made him privy to one or two things that most people didn't know. This secret tunnel for one.

"What do you want?" repeated Rafe.

"Who are you, Ethan?" asked Harry, a little more forcibly than he'd planned.

"Who- What do you mean?"

"I mean, who are you? Where are you from? Where have you been the past sixteen years? Why do you keep your past hidden?"

Rafe stopped moving and stared at Harry emotionlessly. "I'll tell you what," he said quietly, "you Apparate today and I'll tell you a few things."

Harry stared at Rafe, he was set. The way his jaw clenched, that look in his eyes. This was the best deal Harry was going to get. "All right.... if I Apparate then."

They talked sparingly the rest of the way down the tunnel and only a little in the shack. With Harry preparing himself to try to Apparate, Rafe sat down on one of the old chairs he had repaired. He thought to himself about what he would tell Harry if he actually did Apparate, and there was a very high possibility that he would. *Well he mused were could I begin. I couldn't tell him about the Mark or my father.... that would definitely lose me his trust and I'd probably be cursed from here to next week. That still leaves a lot I can tell him....*

"Apyraceus," cried Harry.

Rafe only just saw it and then he saw nothing. Harry disappeared with a loud crack and reappeared almost instantly on the other side of the room, all in one piece. He'd done it, he'd Apparated. Ethan sighed, he had expected no less.

Harry was momentarily shocked, he hadn't even felt it. One moment he was looking at one wall the next he was staring at Rafe in his chair. Harry had Apparated. He had jumped across space in an instant, he had covered the distance between two points in an instant, he had severely broken one of the wizarding world's laws.... But that didn't matter right now. "Apyraceus!"

Again it happened instantly; he was back on the other side of the room. He hadn't heard a crack as when other people Apparated around him, but he supposed there was one. It was difficult to grasp the quick changes in his vision. It was like looking at one thing and having it instantly changed into another before you could even blink. It was certainly different.

He turned to Ethan when he heard clapping and saw a smile on his face. "Well done," Rafe said honestly.

Harry nodded his thanks. "We had a deal, Ethan...."

"That we did. Well... what do you want to know?"

Harry stared at Ethan for a moment. "Tell me where you grew up?"

"England."

"Where in England?"

"A little orphanage south of Manchester. I forget the name... Tontee, Tongre, Taloo?" he said, appearing to be lost in thought.

"So you didn't live in America?"

"No, I did. I... moved there when I was eleven...." He knew Harry's next question before he asked it.

"Why?"

For the first time since Harry had known him, he saw a flicker of pain cross Ethan's face. "I gave up a few things... to find out what I didn't need to know?"

"And what didn't you need to know?"

"That, Harry, is the only question I won't answer. And nothing you can say will change that."

"Then how can I know that you can be trusted?"

"You can't. All I can offer you is my word that I'm on the light side of this war, and always will be."

Harry gazed at Ethan, he sounded honest enough. "That will do for now, I guess. But god have mercy on you if you cross me. You don't want me as your enemy."

Rafe nodded with understanding. "Anything else?"

"Yeah, one more question. Why didn't you come to Hogwarts? You must have received a letter?"

"I did receive a letter, and it was the worst thing I've ever received. Not everyone can be happy when they find out who they truly are?"

"Righ' now gather 'round," said Hagrid gruffly on the cold Monday morning down on the grounds. "Don' be frightened now'."

The Sixth year Care of Magical Creatures class approached Hagrid with caution. He was standing on the outside of a fence paddock that he had obviously built. There was a box in the middle of this paddock. A big wooden box about twice the size of Hagrid. None of them would have minded so much if it hadn't been for the words on the side of the box in red letters. *Caution, Do Not Open, Highly Dangerous.*

Hagrid seemed oblivious to their fear and began to explain. "Now this creature will appear on yer NEWT so pay close attention."

"Hagrid," said Harry before he continued, "is this your 'special delivery?"

"Aye, Harry. This is it. Took me awhile ter get 'old of one," he said proudly.

"What is it?" voiced a nervous looking Ravenclaw.

"Yer'll see in a minute?"

As Hagrid explained the finer points of the creature's native habitat, without actually naming the creature, Padma and Harry moved closer to each other and she grasped his hand.

"Well, now I want one of yer to open its box," continued Hagrid. "Stay out of the paddock an' levitate the lid off."

It was with more than a slight apprehension that Hermione moved up and towards Hagrid, her wand out. She stood on the first tier of the wooden holdings and raised her wand. "Wingardium Leviosa," she said with a slight shake in her voice.

The lid of the box flew off and this caused the four side panels to fall to the ground. Harry felt Padma move closer behind him as they fell. When the box was down it revealed a sleeping lump of, well Harry didn't know what it was?

Hermione did though, as did several other people who stepped back quickly. "Oh, Hagrid," she said. "Oh....."

The creature stirred and began to stand. Harry saw it clearly for the first time and was momentarily stunned by its size. It was twice as wide as Hagrid, but fell just short of the half-giant's height. What struck him the most though was what the creature appeared to be, or didn't appear to be. From what Harry could tell it was a little bit of everything.

"This," said Hagrid, beaming at the creature, "is a Chimera."

Harry nodded with understanding, but instantly noticed that he was the only one within twenty metres of the chimera besides Hagrid. The rest of the class had fallen back to a safe distance. Harry was curious though and he moved up onto the fence with Hagrid to get a better look at the beast.

From what he could tell it had the body of a goat, though bigger than any normal goat, the tail of a dragon, he recognised it as a Hungarian Horntail, and its head was that of a lion. The chimera had a proud mane and eyes. Its gaze fell on Harry and for an instant he was sure the creature nodded at him.

"Did you see tha', Harry?" said Hagrid. "It acknowledged yer.... get in

there and bow to it, Harry. Trust me, yer'll be sorry otherwise."

Harry was torn for a moment. The chimera could probably, definitely rip him apart. But there was a touch of nervousness in Hagrid's voice; Harry did as he was told. He climbed over the fence and jumped into the paddock. Moving a few steps forward, he came within three feet of the chimera. He took a deep breath, and then bowed.

The chimera roared with what Harry assumed was approval. He turned and looked at the rest of the group, most were staring with bated breath and Padma was biting her nails. Harry turned back to the chimera, with another bow he started walking away slowly. He made it out of the paddock.

The rest of that lesson was devoted to a long explanation of the chimera from Hagrid and soon enough Harry found himself heading back up to the castle for lunch. Ron and Hermione walked next to him and Harry couldn't help but notice that the two of them kept smiling at one another and every so often their hands brushed together. Harry didn't comment, he just took hold of Padma's hand and smiled. *When had that happened...?*

The weeks seemed to fly by to Harry and soon enough he found himself waking up on the first of December, and to the first snowfall of the season. It didn't settle though, as the ground was wet from a recent rainfall. Harry felt that that didn't matter, there would be plenty more snow falls soon enough.

Today was Sunday and Harry had promised Padma they'd spend the day together. They would have yesterday but Harry had wanted to practice Apparation, he hadn't told Padma this of course but it had taken a sizeable chunk out of the day. His progress was excellent. Harry could now Apparate across the room with a single thought and could get up and down the hill outside the shack. No need for a wand or the magic word, he had technically passed Apparation training.

Harry absently ate some toast as the hall filled up for breakfast around him. He kept glancing at the door every time it opened but Padma failed to enter. Harry wasn't worried, he'd meet her soon enough. Once the Hall was pretty much full to capacity, Harry had another look around.

Ron, Hermione and Ethan were sitting on the table around him. He looked over at the Ravenclaw table in hopes of seeing her there. Instead he caught sight of Luna Lovegood, whom he hadn't seen or spoken to in a while, except for DA meetings. She still had her wand stuck behind her ear for safe keeping.

Harry moved on but still couldn't see Padma. With a small frown he said goodbye to his friends and promised to see them later. He exited the Hall and came upon the entrance hall. It was deserted. Harry had a feeling in the pit of his stomach now. If everyone else was in the hall, where was Padma? Was it too much of a coincidence that it was *her* who wasn't in the hall or couldn't be found. Harry tried to rationalise, over the past few weeks he and she had taken long strolls around the lake. *She was probably there* he thought, trying to convince himself that everything was fine, all the while the uneasiness in his stomach grew.

Harry stepped out into the cool December morning. The snow was still falling lightly but Harry could still see for miles across the grounds. What he saw didn't encourage him. As far as he could tell the grounds were empty. The lake was partially hidden from view and Harry decided to check there. He was sure he would find her there.

Harry set off at a jog, but soon found himself running. Why he was running he didn't know? She could be fine and well up at the castle but Harry felt that that wasn't true. Harry was panting when he came up on the banks of the lake. A slight film of ice had hardened on its surface and the snow fell on it, creating the illusion that the lake was actually a snow field. Harry ignored it though. She wasn't there. He stared into the forbidding looking forest that began a few metres away and wondered if she could be in there. *No, that doesn't make sense...*

As Harry turned to the lake and then back to the eaves of the forest a resolution dawned on him, the Marauder's Map. That would tell him where she was, and if she was on Hogwart's grounds. Harry found new hope in the map but had barely taken a few steps before it was shattered and his worst fears were confirmed.

There was a screech above him and Harry looked up in time to see a black eagle with a blood red beak soar down through the white sky and

land sharply on his shoulder. Harry felt his strength leave him as he quickly removed the parchment around the bird's leg. Once he had, the eagle took off, digging its claws painfully into Harry's shoulder.

Harry stared at the note in his hand for a moment and then, with his stomach in knots, he opened it.

We have her. Come to the Shrieking Shack alone if you want to see her alive. You have until half past the hour. Come alone, Potter.

Chapter 10 - Death

I love the man that can smile in trouble, that can gather strength from distress, and grow brave by reflection. 'Tis the business of little minds to shrink, but he whose heart is firm, and whose conscience approves his conduct, will pursue his principles unto death.

--Thomas Paine (1737-1809)

We have her. Come to the Shrieking Shack alone if you want to see her alive. You have until half past the hour. Come alone, Potter.

Harry stood in disbelief for a moment. *Padma... they have Padma.* He checked his watch, it was quarter past nine. Fifteen minutes and they would kill her. Suddenly, a fury welled up inside him unlike any he'd ever felt before. Instead of feeling worried, Harry was furious; they had gone too far... this was out of order... if she's hurt... The anger was set to consume him; he felt the magic pulsing through his veins in response to this extremely strong emotion. The note in his hand exploded into flames as he held it.

It hurt, so much magic was running through him. He could feel it building up, needing release. His magic continued to grow. Harry could smell it, taste it, and hear it. To him it sounded sort of like Phoenix song, but it was dull. And then finally he saw it. His magic had grown so much that it

just burst out of him. Blinding white light was all he could see; it was so hot... and painful. *Was this the power Dumbledore told me about? The power the Dark Lord knows not? Had this happened in the hospital?* The pain from this release was huge. It took all he had just to remain standing. Harry didn't know how long he stood inside the light; to him it felt like hours. Hours inside his magic, where at once it hurt so much, but at the same time felt so good. Almost instantly the light subsided. The pain was gone and everything appeared normal. That was until he looked around himself. His magic, the white light, had destroyed everything within a fifty metre radius. Trees on the outskirts of the Forest burned, the grass was reduced to ash. The fine layer of snow that had settled had melted, as had a section of the ice lake, and anything in his way had been uprooted and thrown past the edge of this ring of destruction.

Harry took all of this in and then he remembered Padma. Checking his watch he saw that only five minutes had passed. He looked around himself again... this would have to wait till later. His anger was growing again. Once more he could feel his magic, but this time it felt second nature to him, it made him feel powerful. He raised his hand and saw the magic there, faint crackles of light emanated from it, like little bolts of lightning. They reminded him of his scar.

Without thinking, he extended his right arm and shouted "ACCIO FIREBOLT!" Looking up at what he knew to be his window up at Gryffindor Tower, he saw something burst through the pane of glass, shattering it into a thousand pieces. The broom zoomed through the air, faster than Harry had ever seen it go. Within five seconds he had it in his hand and was beginning to mount it. He kicked off from the ground with such force that he was soon higher than he'd ever been on his broom. He soared through the air, at amazing speeds, fuelled on pure anger. Up and over the forest, the wind howling in his wake. The forest gave way to the road that led to Hogsmeade and soon he was near the hill that held the shack. He soon saw the shack and began his descent.

Outside, beside the front of the door, was a single man dressed in black robes complete with a mask, a Death Eater. Harry came down in the trees to the left of the shack. Leaving his broom where it was, he pulled out his wand and ran towards the man. Before the Death Eater could

react, Harry slammed into him hard, knocking him to the floor. Harry didn't stop; he raised his fist and brought it crashing down into the man's mask. The mask snapped under the force of his fist and Harry's fist connected with the Death Eater's nose. Howling with pain the man tried to raise his wand, Harry was quicker. He turned his wand on the Death Eater, "Stupefy." The man lay still, unconscious, blood covering his face from his now broken nose.

Anger still consumed Harry. He turned towards the door and walked towards it. He raised his hand and without even saying anything the door blew off its hinges inwards, with wood splinters flying everywhere Harry entered the shack. The first thing he noticed was that it was quiet... quiet and dark. And then he saw something else. In the layers and layers of dust that covered everything from the years of disuse the shack had endured. He saw the footprints he and Rafe had made but he also saw something else. Two sets of footprints could be seen going up the stairs. He and Rafe never went up the stairs. Harry wasted no time. Running up the filth covered steps he hoped that she was still alive... if not...

Harry now stood alone on the landing at the top of the stairs. He could feel that something was wrong. Surely anyone here would have heard him by now? He looked at all the doors on this floor in quick succession, on one of them, in the gap between the floor and the door; he could see a thin beam of light pouring out onto the landing. It didn't take a genius.

Harry ran over to the door and without hesitation, turned the handle and walked in. He realised and recognised several things all at once. This was the room where he had first met Sirius. Padma was on the bed... not moving. There was a Death Eater standing over her, a knife in his hand and a wand trained on her heart. And finally he saw a man calmly sitting in a chair by the fire, a man with a silver hand.

"Harry," said Peter Pettigrew happily when Harry entered. "How wonderful to see you again." Harry felt his anger, and disgust, increase ten fold at the site of Wormtail. "Please, sit down."

Harry used every ounce of strength he had to stop himself attacking Wormtail and controlling his magic; he couldn't do it while the other man had his wand pointed at Padma. "Let her go, Wormtail... or else...."

"I'm afraid not, Harry. You see, as long as we have her," he nodded towards Padma, "you can't do anything to us." Wormtail smiled as if this settled everything.

Harry clenched his fist around his wand. "Really. Well, okay, how about this. You release her, and you and your friend leave here alive."

Wormtail wasn't listening. "Do you realise this is the very room where we met in your third year, where you first met Sirius."

If Harry was angry a minute ago, it was nothing compared to the anger raging through him now. "Don't-you-dare-talk-about-him."

"It was a shame how he died, just terrible. Do you know I felt a bit sorry when Bellatrix told me what had happened. But that is all in the past. I am to take you to my Lord."

That was enough for him. Harry raised his wand and pointed it at Wormtail. "Stupefy!" The curse flew out of Harry's wand and rocketed through the air towards Wormtail. It was about to hit him when suddenly he raised his silver arm and the curse seemed to be absorbed into it. It glowed red for a second and then became silver once more. Harry was confused for a moment, but that feeling soon gave way to hatred.

"Tut, tut, Harry. I'm afraid your friend here will pay for that." He nodded towards the man at the bed.

The Death Eater didn't react for a moment, but then. "Crucio!" The man fired the most painful curse known at Padma. Harry could see her open her eyes and then suddenly her screams filled the room.

"AAARRGGGHHH!"

"NO, YOU BASTARD." Harry raised his wand in a flash and quickly fired the disarming curse at the man. It hit him square in the chest and he flew backwards, hitting the wall with a sickening crack. He did not get back up. Harry wheeled round and pointed his wand back at Wormtail, but it was too late. A disarming charm hit him in the face and shoved him back against the door. "Uuff," was all he said as he slid to the floor, his wand now in Wormtail's possession.

Harry looked over at Padma. She was awake now, tears were in her eyes. She was scared, Harry could tell that much. He tried to tell her everything was going to be all right, tried to say it with his eyes. But then Wormtail moved over to her, a wand trained on both Harry and Padma. She passed out again, holding her stomach. "How should she die, Harry? This is what my Master told you would happen; it shouldn't come as a surprise. You refused him, that wasn't wise. It has only resulted in death-"

"YOURS," shouted Harry, the anger rising again. He raised his arms. "STUPEFY." The jets of red light shot out of Harry's arms, they were extremely powerful.

Wormtail smiled and lazily raised his silver arm. The curse hit it hard. At first Harry thought that once again it had been absorbed, but no. He saw Wormtail struggling with this one. His silver arm glowed red and then Wormtail forced it back to silver, but the red returned, again Wormtail forced it back. This time it stayed silver, he had stopped the curse, just, but it had taken a lot out of him. He was panting heavily and exhaustion was evident.

Harry didn't waste his chance. "Expelliarmus!" he cried. This spell hit Wormtail and knocked him back against the wall. Harry's wand flew from Pettigrew's hand and into his own.

That was all Wormtail would take. With one last fearful look at Harry, he disappeared with a small pop! Forgetting about him in an instant, Harry rushed over to Padma on the bed.

"Padma," he cried, kneeling down next to her. "Padma, speak to me please."

Padma began to move and she opened her eyes; she stared somewhat strangely at Harry before seeming to recognise him. "Harry...." she struggled to say, "Harry, it hurts...." She reached down and grabbed her stomach; Harry saw that there was blood on her robes, Padma passed out again. Harry suddenly felt sick, they'd hurt her, she'd been stabbed. He hadn't stopped them, the Death Eater with the knife, the Cruciatus... he had to get her to Madam Pomfrey.

With strength surprising even himself, Harry easily picked up Padma and started to run. Out onto the landing, down the stairs, taking three at a time until he was outside. *What now?* he thought. *I can't fly back, she might fall off...nothing for it, I have to run.*

And run was what he did, he practically sprinted down the hillside and down onto the main road to Hogwarts, Padma still in his arms. He reached the old road and immediately continued to run. *How far he thought five, ten minutes to the castle doors maybe? Another five to get to the hospital wing.*

It was as if he was possessed, nothing, absolutely nothing could have stopped Harry from running. He didn't slow down; he didn't stop to catch his breath. He ran with every ounce of strength he had. Under normal circumstances he would have collapsed with exhaustion, but not now. The snow was falling thicker now, but it didn't deter him. Harry looked down at Padma as he ran. Her robes were now heavily stained with blood, as were his hands. *If she dies he thought if she dies because of me I'll....*

Harry reached the gates to the castle and passed them by in a blur, he raced up the drive with all the speed he could muster, passing several bewildered looking second years as he went. In what seemed like hours to Harry, but was really a few minutes, Harry arrived at the wooden door that marked the entrance to the castle. Thankfully some more students were coming out of it so it was open. Harry jumped up the steps, not touching a one and barged through the crowd, knocking a few people down. But he didn't have time to stop and apologise.

The run was now getting to Harry. His lungs burned with the amazing effort he had just put in. He'd made it from the Shrieking Shack to Hogwarts in ten minutes on foot. *That has got to be a record* he thought as he rushed up the stone steps in the entrance hall. Every breath and step was now painful but Harry didn't slow down. Passing by students and even a few professors, Harry did not stop. He raced through the corridors, up flights of stairs and finally, when he thought his lungs would burst with the enormous effort, he saw the doors to the hospital wing.

With one last extraordinary effort Harry put on a final burst of speed and

slammed hard into the doors of the hospital, back first. Ignoring the pain he shouted. "MADAM POMFREY! SHI- MADAM POMFREY." *Damn it, where was she?* he thought. "MADAM POMFREY, DAMN IT! MADAM POM-

"Potter, what's all this shouting," said Madam Pomfrey emerging from her office. If Harry had ever been so happy to see the elderly matron it was then. "I expect better of you-" Madam Pomfrey's words died on her lips as she caught sight of Padma. She was now all business. "Quickly, Harry. This bed." Harry ran over and placed Padma on a bed. "Now tell me, Potter, what happened?"

Harry panted heavily, beads of sweat dripping down his face; it was really warm in here. "D- Death... Eaters, stabbed- stomach...."

Madam Pomfrey immediately began examining Padma's stomach. Harry on the other hand, suddenly felt very sick and dizzy. The effects of that run had started to catch up with him. He stumbled backwards and fell on to a bed. His vision became blurry and he felt very hot. With one last look at Padma, Harry passed out.

"Nothing is impossible, Harry. I want you to remember that, you'll need it. Nothing and I mean nothing is impossible...."

"We will meet again, a teenager can defeat the Dark Lord, and you're more powerful than you know."

"I'll remember, Sirius...."

Harry awoke with a start. It took him a moment to get his bearings. He was lying on a soft bed in the dark. Slowly his eyes became accustomed to the darkness and he began to make shapes of his surroundings. There was a table; high windows through which little moonlight flittered through, and a row of dark masses that he assumed were beds.

He sat for a moment with his hands pressed against his forehead trying to remember where he was. And then in one swift moment of bittersweet realisation it hit him. Quick as a flash Harry jumped out of bed and searched his pocket for his wand, it wasn't there. He cursed under his breath and then raised his right arm. "Lumos," he whispered. A ball of

light grew out of his hand and hovered over his palm, lighting the immediate area and casting pale shadows over everything around.

It took Harry a moment to spot her, and when he did he breathed a sigh of relief. Padma was asleep three beds over, she was slightly pale but the slow rhythmic movement of her chest showed Harry that she was breathing and alive.

His relief was short lived, though. It was immediately replaced by a feeling of guilt. This was his fault. Wormtail had taken her to get to him, and in turn get him to Voldemort. She had paid for being close to him, as Voldemort had promised. Harry let the light die in his hands and then picked up a glass off the bed side cabinet. With a cry he threw it across the room and it hit the wall hard, shattering into dozens of separate pieces. He sighed angrily and sat back down on his bed, trying to control his anger. After what happened last time he got angry....

And what had happened? he thought.

My magic escaped and destroyed everything around me... Harry answered himself.

How?

Harry sighed again. *How...? I got angry, it made me powerful. The magic responded to the strong emotion I was feeling.*

It wouldn't have happened to anyone else... again you're different...

The little rational voice in his head was starting to annoy him. *I don't need this* he thought.

Harry lay back down on the bed and removed his glasses. This would wait until morning; no doubt Dumbledore wants to know what happened. Not to mention Parvati, or Padma's parents....

As these thoughts clouded his mind, Harry slowly felt his eyes close and before he knew it, sleep took him. Harry didn't know how long he slept, but when he woke up the sun was shining into the hospital wing and he could hear the daily activity of the school outside the room.

Harry slowly swung around and let his feet touch the ground. He was just about to stand when a sudden and sharp stab of pain shot through his scar. Harry quickly raised his hand and rubbed it viciously. Having been experiencing this on and off for the past six years, Harry didn't pay much heed to it. It was the brief flashes that accompanied the pain that were what now interested him.

And what he saw this time made him smile grimly. That was probably the Slytherin in him. Wormtail was getting what he deserved for failing his master. As the pain subsided Harry stood up. The first thing he did was look over to Padma. She appeared to be fine, but the glare he received from the person next to her made Harry cringe.

"Hello, Parvati," he said quietly, walking across the room and placing the bed with Padma on between them. "How- How are you?"

"How do you think I am?" she spat. Harry didn't say anything, so she continued. "This," she gestured towards Padma, "is your fault."

Harry sighed and had the grace to look down. "I- I know," he whispered.

"You should have just left her alone. None of this would have happened if she had just listened to me...."

"What...?" said Harry.

Parvati scowled. "I told her a month ago to stay away from you. Told her it was too dangerous being involved with Harry Potter."

Harry's jaw stiffened. "And what did she say?"

Parvati laughed humourlessly. "She said I should mind my own business. Told me she was happy and to leave you and her alone."

"Well-"

"I was right, though, wasn't I?" Her voice held a bitterness Harry had never heard before. "Look what you've done. She nearly died...." Parvati's voice faltered near the end and she looked down. "Oh! By the way... thank you for rescuing her..."

Harry looked up when she said this and was about to reply when Madam

Pomfrey emerged from her office. She was holding a tray in her hands. "Ah, Potter," she said drawing level to Harry. "Here, drink this." She put the tray on the bedside table and handed a small goblet of a clear blue liquid to Harry. Harry hesitated. "It's a strengthening potion, Potter. You over did it yesterday."

Harry nodded and swallowed the potion quickly, it tasted terrible. As Harry drank, Madam Pomfrey took out her wand and began to examine Padma. "How is she?" asked Harry quietly when he finished the potion, feeling energised from it.

Madam Pomfrey didn't answer straight away, and when she did she addressed Parvati. "She's going to be fine. The knife pierced her small intestine and lower liver. But the magic is repairing it slowly. She'll probably be asleep for another day or so, until she is fully healed."

Harry sighed with relief and Parvati seemed to relax as well. *She'll be fine* he thought. *But this was still my fault...*

"Potter, the headmaster wanted to see you when you woke. He is expecting you anytime."

Harry jumped out of his thoughts as Madam Pomfrey spoke. It took him a moment to process what she said but when he did he nodded and began to walk away. He had barely taken a few steps before he stopped and turned to look at Padma. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

Harry left the hospital wing and was immediately swept up in the throng of students making their way around the castle. He briefly glanced at his watch and saw that the first lesson of the day had just ended. The second one was just beginning.

As Harry walked the familiar route to Dumbledore's office, he heard several people shout his name. He neither had the time nor the patience for them now so he just ignored it. Thankfully no one tried to stop him. He passed a very dazed looking Luna Lovegood, who just smiled happily at him and walked on. Eventually he arrived at the stone gargoyle that marked the entrance. It was closed.

I don't know the password he thought. "Em... Canary Cream?" The

gargoyle didn't move. "Chocolate Frog?" It still didn't move. "Ber-"

"Skiving Snackbox!" said a familiar voice behind Harry. The stone gargoyle sprang to life and Harry turned around and looked into the face of Albus Dumbledore.

"Professor...."

"Let's talk upstairs, Harry." Dumbledore's voice seemed to have a note of sympathy in it, and also confusion.

Harry was soon sitting opposite Dumbledore next to his desk. A few moments passed in silence before the headmaster spoke. "Please tell me what happened, Harry?"

And Harry did. He began with his plans to spend the day with Padma and finished with his collapse in the hospital wing. He didn't exclude a single detail. Especially about the white magic that had surrounded him after receiving the note. Dumbledore hadn't interrupted him once, and when he finished he found himself seeing confusion in the old man's eyes. "What is it, sir?"

"Your magic, Harry. It is growing extremely powerful in response to your emotions. Now couple that with your already high levels through your connection with Voldemort.... This is something you will need to learn to control...."

Harry nodded; he had expected to hear something like this. After all his magic had destroyed a part of the forest. "How can I control something I don't understand...?" he finally said.

"That," said Dumbledore solemnly, "is something that you have to discover on your own. There are no answers that I can give you, only those you will find by yourself."

Typical Dumbledore answer... thought Harry. His thoughts had strayed back to Padma, though, and how she had paid for being close to him. "Padma nearly died because of me...." he whispered.

Dumbledore sighed and, in one of those rare moments, looked his age. "Voldemort did strike out at you through her, Harry. I'm sorry to say I

don't know how she was abducted from Hogwarts, maybe she can tell us...."

"She's not awake yet," replied Harry dryly. "Her wounds are still healing."

"Did Madam Pomfrey-"

"Tomorrow maybe? She wasn't really that sure...." Harry stared at the floor as a fresh wave of guilt washed over him. *Only me* he thought *this could only happen to me....*

"What's troubling you, Harry?" asked Dumbledore.

Harry was stunned for a moment at the pointlessness of this question. *What's troubling me...?* "What isn't troubling me!" he growled. "Everyday I fear that he'll kill one of my friends. Yesterday I got lucky, they needed Padma alive. But what if one of these days he decides to kill someone close to me just out of spite? To break me, make me give in."

"The Fidelius charm-"

"I know Ron and Hermione are protected, but I have more than just two friends..."

Dumbledore didn't speak for a moment. "No one's safety is guaranteed, Harry. We are at war. It is a harsh reality of the world that you'll come to accept. Just like I did after killing Grindelwald...."

Harry sat in silent thought for a moment before a question popped into his head. "Professor, Voldemort wants to rid the world of all but the purebloods, but what did Grindelwald want?"

Dumbledore's brow furrowed in thought for a moment before he answered. "You have to understand, Harry, Voldemort is threatening the entire world. Grindelwald wanted something on a lesser scale, but still just as evil. He believed in Hitler's notion of an Aryan race. And was prepared to go to any lengths to see it achieved.... I'm sorry to say that he wasn't stopped earlier in the war... things may have been different." Dumbledore hung his head as if he was weighed down by some hidden guilt that he had been carrying for years.

Harry looked at his watch, he was surprised to see that he had been up here with Dumbledore for an hour and a half, it was almost lunch time. He looked back at Dumbledore and saw the old man staring caringly back at him. "There is not much I can do to help you now, Harry. So much is still to be done before the end. But I can promise, one day, one day it will get better."

Harry smiled sadly. "But not before it gets worse. Voldemort hasn't even truly shown himself to the world at large yet. The dementor attack was his first real challenge. The way I see it, the world is still sinking into the darkness with no chance of an end in sight. It may get better one day, but that day will be years away. And I might not even be there to see it."

A flash of what Harry took to be pain flashed across Dumbledore's face. "Harry, a good person is willing to suffer, to die for the things that they care about; for love, for the right choices. But that does not mean that you will die... nothing is certain."

Harry sighed. "Isn't that the truth." Harry held his silence for a moment. "Thank you, Professor. I'm going to go see Padma now." Harry rose from his seat, as did Dumbledore and he followed Harry to the stairs.

"Take care of yourself, Harry. I don't blame you for going off by yourself yesterday; I doubt anyone could have handled the situation as you did. Just try to control your emotions, that power in you isn't something to be trifled with. I'll have to look into this more deeply."

Harry nodded with understanding and walked away down the stairs. Through it all it was times like this when he felt the safest. Talking with Dumbledore in Hogwarts seemed to be calming, relaxing, no matter what they were discussing. Hogwarts was his home and at times it made him forget the darkness and emotion of cruelty that grasped the world in its cold embrace. For this he was very thankful.

Harry found himself walking back towards the hospital wing. It was lunch time so the halls were as busy as when he had gone to see Dumbledore. Harry didn't really notice it anymore, he had endured six years of it, but now he paid special attention to all the whispers that sprung up as he passed people in the halls. He watched the kids from the younger years

meet his eyes quickly before turning away sharply and whispering furiously to their friends. He saw the awestruck looks on some of their faces and he also saw an extreme look of hate from a sixth year Slytherin as he walked by. Malfoy didn't say anything but his scowl said a thousand words.

Harry wondered vaguely if Malfoy would one day be a Death Eater, and if so would he fight him? Then another thought came to him. *What if he already was a Death Eater....? Could he have anything to do with what happened to Padma?* Harry stored that information away for later. If it had been him, he would be sorry.

Harry didn't attend the rest of his lessons that day. He sat guiltily by Padma's bed in the hospital wing. Parvati had gone back to class as it became clear that Harry wouldn't be leaving, she didn't want to talk to him right now, and Harry couldn't blame her.

The long hours past in silence. Padma muttered some small words under her breath which Harry didn't catch but that was it. It was at seven thirty that Parvati returned, she didn't seem to hold the same amount of hostility towards him and she spoke without the bitterness in her voice, but he could tell she was still angry.

"Ron and Hermione were asking after you," she said once she had sat down. "They're worried."

Harry nodded his thanks and looked at Padma once before standing up. She was a bit pale but other than that it was as if she was just asleep. As he walked through the halls he wondered what he was going to tell his friends. *The truth* said the little voice in his head. *You tell them the truth... But what is the truth? They hurt her to get to me and that they could be next if they left Hogwarts?*

Harry sighed and rubbed his heavy eyes. How long could he keep this up? How long could he continue the fight? The war had already taken so much and it was only just beginning. Harry's thoughts strayed to Sirius, having accepted his death he could now go days without thinking of his godfather and feeling the guilt... but it was always there in the back of his mind, taunting him. Harry passed by a painting without really looking at it. It took him a moment to process what he saw and when he did Harry

stopped and turned around back to the painting. It was Sir Cadogan and he was bowing to Harry.

"Good evening, sir," said the knight respectfully.

"Er... hi," said Harry. "I don't mean to be rude... but why are you bowing to me?"

Sir Cadogan rose and looked at Harry as though he were stupid. "Why? I'm bowing to the descendant of Godric Gryffindor, am I not?"

Harry's brow furrowed in confusion. "Yes," he said warily, "yes you are. But not many people know that."

The small knight stuck his chest out proudly while Harry vaguely wondered how he had found out. "Why hide something as honourable as this?" Cadogan asked.

Harry continued to frown at the portrait. "The less my enemies know the better...."

"Ahh! Never show your hand until the stakes are high. Very good, boy!"

Harry nodded and smiled slightly at the knight. It reminded him of Mad Eye Moody. "How did you know I was Gryffindor's descendant?"

"My comrade in arms resides in the headmaster's office. It was he who told me." As the knight talked his small pony walked into the frame of the portrait and nudged his master's hand. Sir Cadogan looked down at the animal for a moment and then turned back to Harry. "It appears I am needed on the fourth floor, sir. The goblins in their portrait are rebelling again." The knight pulled his glittering sword from its sheath and mounted the small pony. With a small click the beast started to move and then began galloping away through the portraits.

Harry stood smiling and shaking his head for a moment as Sir Cadogan's battle cries grew fainter and fainter. He briefly thought of Sir Cadogan's sword and his gaze drifted down to his left arm. He hadn't called Gryffindor's sword to him since that morning in the common room where he had instinctively grasped Hermione. With no more than a thought the strong sword appeared in his hand, the metal cold against

his skin.

Harry sighed as his eyes swept up and down the blade, his image blurrily reflected in the steel. He wondered if this is how it would end... Harry knew he never wanted to use the killing curse against anyone, even Voldemort. But what choices did that leave? He was fairly certain that the Dark Lord would die if he severed his head with the sword, but would he ever get a chance? And could he do it if he did get that chance?

With another quick thought Harry put the sword away, feeling the familiar weight in his arm as it returned. *This wasn't the time* he thought *to be deciding how to end it.*

Without anymore distractions Harry made it to the portrait of the Fat Lady. She smiled at him slightly as he approached and bowed gracefully as Sir Cadogan had done. "You know to then?" She nodded. "Frivolous."

The portrait opened and Harry stepped into the common room. The first thing he noticed was the lack of noise, and the second was the eyes of every person in the room on him. He had expected it, but it still made him uncomfortable. "Hi..." he said to them all.

"Harry, over here," said Ron from the armchairs by the fire. As Harry walked over to the fire most people returned to whatever they were doing before he came in, but some were still casting glances at him out of the corners of their eyes. "How are you, mate," asked Ron as he sat down. Harry could tell he was trying to keep his voice casual, but the concern was there.

Harry looked at him and then at Hermione who was holding his hand across the chair next to him, the same concerned look on her face. To his right sat Ginny, who was also staring at him with worry. Harry sighed and rubbed his scar with the back of his hand, it was burning slightly. "I feel terrible," he finally said.

"Well you're probably hungry," said Hermione, trying to sound cheerful. "You missed breakfast, lunch, and dinner. We could go to the kitchens-"

"No," he said quietly but firmly. "I'm not hungry."

Hermione felt silent, as did Ron. It was Ginny who spoke next. "What

happened?" she asked simply.

For some reason the question didn't anger him as much as it would have had it come from someone else. He held his breath for a moment and then turned to look at Ginny. She returned his gaze strongly but Harry could tell she was nervous, as if he might shout. He didn't.

"The Death Eater's took Padma; I went and got her back." And then Harry recited his story, ending with his collapse in the hospital wing. Not one of them spoke when he finished and the awkward silence was most uncomfortable. "That's what happened," he said quietly.

"Harry," began Ron slowly. "It was you who caused all that destruction down on the grounds. We saw it in Magical Creatures and thought there had been a fire."

"It was me, and it was my magic that did it, not fire. I got angry and.... well there are other reasons which are my own," The three of them looked hurt that he wasn't going to tell them why it happened. "I'm sorry but this is my problem, I'll just have to learn how to control it."

"And how are you going to do that?" asked Ginny.

"Dumbledore's going to do what he can. I suppose I'll just have to wait."

"And how's Padma doing?" asked Ron.

"She's going to be all right, but it doesn't matter. I'm going to have to end it with her; she won't be safe until I'm out of her life."

None of his friends had anything to say to this. Deep down they knew he was right, but that didn't make to fair. "You won't-"

"Don't... don't even try, Hermione. It has to be done."

"Well she won't be happy about it, Harry. I'll tell you now it will hurt her." Hermione finished speaking and waited for Harry to retaliate.

"It may hurt her more to stay with me," he said calmly but sadly. He glanced quickly at Ginny; she remained impassive, not giving anything away as to what she might be feeling. And then Harry briefly wondered why he cared what she felt about him and Padma.

"It's up to you, Harry. But do it gently...."

The hours of the night slipped slowly by. Ron and Hermione were doing some Transfiguration homework, Harry didn't have any because he wasn't there to get it so he just stared idly into the flames, the guilt slowly eating away at him.

At one point in the night, he didn't know when, he looked up to see the common room was almost empty. Ron and Hermione were putting away their parchment, Ginny had already left, presumably she'd gone to bed, and the only other people in the room were a group of sixth and seventh years.

"Do you want to go up to bed, Harry?" asked Ron.

Harry nodded and lazily picked himself up. His limbs ached from the events of the previous day and he felt he needed a good night's sleep. Harry said goodnight to Hermione at the bottom of the stairs and Ron kissed her quickly before the two of them went up to their dormitory.

Harry fell to his bed without even changing out of his robes. A brief look at his wristwatch showed him that it was 11:30. Barely five minutes later, his eyes closed and sleep took him.

It was there again. The circle grew bigger the closer he got to it. There were the bodies of the dead littered all around it; the ground was stained heavily with their blood.

Harry stood still sadly. He was used to this dream now; he had had it enough times over the past few months. It was always the same. The circle grew, more people died, and he awoke. This time though it was different.

He looked into the circle and saw the images of a thousand different places flick by in quick succession. A forest, city, ocean, mountains, the sky. And then it went black, and two spots of red light shone out of the darkness. Eyes, blood red eyes. The circle flickered and disappeared entirely, only to be replaced by a monster.

Lord Voldemort stared at Harry with the look of upmost disgust on his face. Harry returned his glare, sure of himself that this monster no longer

scared him. They walked towards each other slowly, Voldemort raised his wand, and Harry called Gryffindor's sword to him. The blade appeared in his hand and Harry stared at it grimly for a moment. He felt sure that he could destroy Voldemort now. He looked back at the creature only to realise that he had a blade of his own in his hand. This took Harry by surprise and he didn't move for a moment, that was all Voldemort needed.

Harry stood helplessly as Voldemort's sword gleamed through the air and braced himself as the point pierced his chest. It was over in one swift moment and Harry fell to the floor screaming, the sword still embedded in him. The last thing he heard was that evil laughter before death took him.

Harry awoke with a start and instantly reached for his wand on the bedside table. He was breathing heavily as he looked wildly around. He had drawn the curtains around his bed as he got in to it and now that was all he saw. He raised his right hand and rubbed his chest, there was no puncture wound nor was there any blood. He breathed a heavy sigh of relief as he accepted that it was just a dream. It had felt very real but it had only been a dream. He glanced at his watch and saw that it was twelve thirty; he had barely been asleep for an hour and now he knew he wouldn't get back to sleep.

Harry fell back on his pillow and groaned inwardly. He could hardly go one night without a nightmare, but he no longer woke up screaming. He found it kind of sad that he could grow used to such terrible dreams about destruction and death, mostly involving his friends, and now no emotion betrayed how he felt. The dream he just had was nothing compared to other dreams he'd had over the past few months. The ones where *he* died were the best he ever had.

He sighed and as he sat up pulled the curtains open and looked around into the dark room. All the other lads in the room slept peacefully, blissfully unaware of his troubles. Harry felt jealous of them for a moment but it didn't last long, he wouldn't wish his nightmares on anyone.

Harry stood up and put his glasses on as he did. Slowly and quietly he moved towards the door. He opened it and slipped out quickly, without

waking anyone up. He made his way down to the common room, which he knew would be deserted and went and sat in his familiar armchair by the fire. He tried to think about anything to keep his mind of his dreams, but that really only left him with the guilt of what happened to Padma and that was not a happy thought either.

Not for the first time that year, he wondered if his parents had sat in these chairs so many years ago, along with the rest of the Marauders. Had Sirius spent nights worrying about the first dark war in this chair? Had his father? Did they have any idea that one day the Marauders would be irreparably ripped apart at the seams by one of their own? Was Pettigrew contemplating joining Voldemort while he was still in school? Harry felt the anger in him as he thought of that traitor and all the trouble his choices had caused, all the death....

Harry's thoughts were disrupted as he heard the Fat Lady open and close. *Who could be out this late?* he thought. He was grasping his wand when the figure entered and loosened his grip a little when he saw who it was.

"Ethan, where've you been?"

Rafe's hand twitched in his pocket slightly as he saw Harry. He hadn't expected anyone to be up this late. He sighed and went and sat in an armchair across from Harry. "I've just been doing some reading in the library... lost track of time."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "The library closed about four hours ago?"

"I was hiding in the stacks, didn't want anyone to see me...." Rafe instantly regretted saying this. It made him sound like he was up to no good.

"Really..." said Harry, his mistrust increasing. "Do you mind if I ask what you were reading?"

Rafe hesitated for a moment before answering. "An Advanced Guide to Transfiguration."

Harry blinked, he hadn't been expecting that. "Why?"

Ethan sighed. "Before I came to England I was learning how to become an Animagus. I'd made some progress as well, but then I came here."

Harry nodded and then thought of his own animagus training. McGonagall hadn't mentioned it in a while and Harry was hoping that she managed to get a Griffin soon.

"How are you, by the way? I heard what happened to Padma. I'm sorry...."

Harry nodded his thanks but now he was thinking about Padma again. "She's doing okay. I got her back here in time, but she shouldn't have been taken in the first place... I put her in danger."

"That's not the only thing bothering you?"

Harry sighed and felt a bit angry at Rafe's bluntness. But he answered anyway. "I feel like I'm the only one who's fighting this war. The only one who is losing anything..." His voice sounded bitterer than he would have liked, but it didn't matter. It felt good to finally say that.

"That's not true, though, is it." It wasn't a question, it was the truth.

Harry growled. "No, no it isn't. But it still feels like it. Anyone that gets close gets hurt. If I were you I'd stay away."

Ethan was silent for a moment as if he was wondering whether or not to say something. He did. "Harry do you know what it feels like to be around you?"

"What?"

"I see it all the time, mostly in the younger students. They sit near you at dinner, or in this room. They like to be close to you. Do you know why?"

Harry shook his head; he hadn't known this, or even noticed this. "Why?" he asked quietly.

"They feel safe near you. You are the only one who has ever challenged Voldemort and won. Of the thousands that have died fighting him you are the only one who has ever survived, ever come close to defeating him. You give them hope. They see that you would die to protect them

and in these times that means everything. They know you're powerful, maybe even enough to challenge him again."

"I've never noticed any of this..."

"Well you wouldn't. People stop talking when you come into a room. But your victories, Harry.... and your losses, mean more than you know. I myself wonder why the hell you carry on after it all? How the hell you carry on? Most people would have given up long ago if they'd had to go through half of what you have... And that's why people admire you, why they sit near you. Voldemort has thrown everything at you and you never broke."

Harry didn't know quite what to say. He didn't know, hadn't the slightest idea that people looked up to him like that. It made him feel good, made him feel like he didn't want to fail them, that he didn't want to take away their hope.

"Thank you, Ethan." Rafe nodded and then yawned, but his eyes remained sharp and alert. He rubbed at the stubble on his chin and shook his head as if to wake himself. "You look tired."

"I'm all right, but you've got big heavy rings under your eyes. Don't you sleep? You're always the last to go to bed and then you're the first to get up."

Harry shrugged. "I don't sleep very well. Haven't had a good night's sleep in months."

Rafe looked at him for a moment and then put his hand in his pocket and pulled out a silver hipflask. Harry thought that it looked to big to have come out of Ethan's jeans pocket. Rafe saw him looking.

"I magically enlarged my pockets. I can fit a lot of things in them."

Harry nodded. *That made sense.* "Could you teach me that sometime?" he asked.

"Sure," said Rafe taking a drink out of the hipflask and then passing it to Harry.

Harry took it and then stared at it in confusion. He tried to look inside at the contents but it was too dark. A strong burning smell came from within that made his nose hurt and his eyes water. Harry coughed. "What is it?"

Rafe smiled. "Dreamless sleep potion."

Harry laughed. "Its Firewhiskey, isn't it?"

"Some people call it that," shrugged Rafe. "Trust me; you'll sleep after a few swigs off that."

Harry stared down at the silver flask in his hands. It felt warm against the coldness of the dark around him and he could do with a decent night's sleep. *Why not* he thought. *You only live once....* Harry brought the flask to his lips and poured some of the liquid into his mouth. At first he felt nothing, the whiskey had the consistency of honey and Harry swallowed it quickly. It was then that it hit him. It was a very sour mash and Harry felt it burn his throat hard as it went down. He started coughing furiously and didn't stop for a full minute. When he did he looked up at Rafe, who was laughing.

"I'm glad-" Harry coughed. "You think its-" He coughed again. "Funny!"

"Don't worry, mate. Everyone nearly dies the first time they try that stuff. How do you feel?"

"Warm," he said.

Rafe nodded. "Try it again."

Harry did, and this time he knew what to expect and managed to stifle his coughs a bit.

Harry and Rafe went up to bed half an hour later at about one thirty. Having drunk his fair share of the Firewhiskey, Harry felt ready to sleep for a month. Rafe had promised him that he wouldn't be getting up anytime soon tomorrow. He heard Ethan mumble something incoherently as he fell into his bed; he was asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow. And, as promised, his sleep was dreamless.

Harry woke up roughly the next morning as someone shook him heavily.

He opened his eyes and immediately closed them again when he looked directly into the sunlight streaming in through the window. He groaned and placed his hand on his forehead.

"Come on, Harry," said Ron. "Get up or you'll not have time for breakfast."

Harry groaned again. "Sod off, Ron," he mumbled, continuing to hold his forehead.

"What's the matter? Is it your scar?"

"No.... Got a headache."

"A headache caused by evil?"

"No, a normal 'sun is too goddamn bright' headache," mumbled Harry.

"Well... are you planning on going to lessons today, or are you going to go see Padma?"

Harry opened his eyes. "Padma... I'm going to see her."

Ron nodded. "All right, mate. We'll see you at lunch?"

"Okay," croaked Harry, sitting up as Ron left the room. He glanced over to Ethan's bed and saw it empty. Grumbling that Ethan could possibly be feeling all right, he got roughly out of bed and stumbled over to his trunk. He took out a clean shirt and robes and put them on, promising himself that he would shower later. Right now he wanted to get to the hospital wing.

After twenty minutes of walking Harry wearily entered the hospital wing, shielding his eyes against the sunlight that fell across his path. He saw Padma still asleep in the bed she'd been in yesterday. A little colour had returned to her face and she was breathing normally, her hair strung out across her face. Harry sat on the bed next to her and remembered the time he'd spent with her. He remembered kissing her for the first time in Hogsmeade, the Prophet article that had followed, and then the time he'd spent with her up on the Astronomy tower. The last thing he saw before Madam Pomfrey came out was how beautiful she had looked on

the night of the Order of Merlin ceremony. The medal from that now sat upstairs in his trunk, gathering dust.

"Good morning, Potter," she said briskly as she swept her wand over Padma, muttering small spells. "I thought you'd be here."

"Uh-huh," he mumbled, raising his hand to his forehead again.

"Is something the matter?"

"I've got a terrible headache...."

Madam Pomfrey nodded and finished checking over Padma. "Stay here; I'll go get a headache cure."

Harry smiled gratefully and leaned his back against the wall, the throbbing from his headache really starting to hurt. Madam Pomfrey returned a few minutes later and tapped him on the shoulder. He opened his eyes and hurriedly accepted the cup of steaming potion in her hand. Before she handed it to him, she quickly lifted one of his eye lids and peered into his left eye.

Finally she handed him the potion and shook her head sadly. Once Harry had drunk the potion his head immediately began to clear and he felt the after effects of the Firewhiskey slipping away.

"Ohh... thanks."

"You welcome, Mr. Potter. But don't think I don't know a hangover when I see one. God knows your father and Sirius Black were in here enough times begging me for a cure. Those two had me making new batches of potion every week."

"My father?"

"Yes and he wasn't the only one. I was giving at least one cure out a day. During the first war the older students thought it better to drink away their problems. Trust me, Mr. Potter; it won't help in the end."

Harry nodded and then turned to Padma. "How's she doing?"

"She should be awake today. Any moment. Are you staying?"

"If that's okay?"

Madam Pomfrey nodded. "She'll probably have a few questions for you anyway. I'll be in my office if anything happens."

Harry swung himself off the bed and reached into his robes pocket, looking for his wand. It wasn't there. He cursed silently under his breath when he remembered that he'd left it in the dirty robes on his bed. He was about to give up when he had a better idea. Raising his right hand he pictured a chair clearly in his mind and without even uttering an incantation conjured a chair to sit on. The fact that it had worked surprised Harry, the fact that he had done it without a wand surprised him again, and also the fact he'd done it without saying the incantation surprised him the most. Whether he knew it or not his magic was increasing in power.

Harry spent the better part of the morning sitting in silence next to Padma's bed. For amusement he conjured a few small balls of magic light and made them chase each other around the room. Every few minutes he would send another one up to join the others. After an hour or so he had three dozen of the small balls of light whirling across the ceiling, all different colours. Red, blue, green, yellow, violet, black, white. All chasing one another. Harry moved his hands back and forth, controlling them all to go where he wanted. He thought it looked amazing as he kept adding more and more balls of magic to the mix. He knew they were harmless, no more dangerous than normal light. Harry forced them left and right, sent them bouncing into one another and even spelt his name with them.

Harry was doing it to pass the time but it also served another purpose. He had seen Hermione do this in the common room, when she had finished all her homework and was waiting patiently for him and Ron to finish, she would conjure the little balls of light without a wand and make them dance. But she could only manage six or so, three for each hand and she could only make them hover back and forth across her palms.

And now here he was. At least seventy of the little magic balls flying across the ceiling all at his command, under his control and he hadn't even broken a sweat. Harry kept pushing himself, conjuring one ball

after another into the air. Soon he had a clean one hundred bouncing back and forth, all a rainbow of colours. If he had to sum it all up in one word, he would have said he was *flawed*. There seemed no end to the amount of magic he could put up there. Ball after ball was added until he lost count and they all became just one big jumble of colour and still he felt no strain. He could feel and control any of the balls up there that he wanted to and not one of them fell. It was amazing.

A bell rang in the distance that ended the second lesson of the day but Harry barely noticed it. With a quick flick of his hand he added five more balls to the mix, each one coming from one of his fingers. He sent the balls flying all over the room. They went under the beds, circled the torches, flittered around his head and formed patterns on the ceiling.

Harry sighed as he moved his hands left and right, controlling the hundreds of balls of light. *If I can do this now he thought and my magic feels like it is still growing. What could I do in a month...?*

"Harry," said a quiet voice to his right. "That's incredible...."

Harry jumped as the voice spoke and he lost his control of the small balls. They began to fall slowly to the ground, those closer to the ground disappeared as they touched it, the others fell like large flakes of snow; slowly and fluttering in the breeze. It made for an amazing sight as Harry turned to Padma, the hundreds of lights reflected in her eyes as the balls fell. Despite her ill look, Harry could tell she was awestruck.

"Padma are you, okay?" he asked desperately.

She continued to watch the falling light as she spoke but then she closed her eyes in a confused expression. "Harry? What... what happened?"

"You don't remember?" She shook her head slowly. "You were abducted, Padma. The Death Eater's took you and- and stabbed you...."

Padma closed her eyes again as if she was remembering. She didn't open them again for a moment and when she did, he saw tears in her eyes. "Harry... I remember," she grabbed her stomach and met his eyes. "You... you came and saved me."

Harry closed his own eyes. How could he tell her that it had to end? She

was scared and fragile at the moment and she needed him. "Yes... I did but-"

"How did you do that with the lights?" she asked, watching the balls. They were still falling and the highest ones were about ten feet of the ground. "It's like a blizzard of magic."

"I don't know how I did it, I just did," he said quickly. "Listen, Padma, how do you feel?"

She frowned. "I feel...?" She pushed the cover son her bed back and lifted her shirt a little so her stomach was exposed. Harry cringed. There was a big purple bruise across her stomach and lower right side; there was also a scar about four inches long that ran across her skin. "It hurts a bit," she said.

"I'll get Madam Pomfrey," Harry said instantly and was off down the room before she could say anything.

He returned with the matron two minutes later and she immediately began checking Padma over. Her diagnosis was that it would be sore for a few days and she would be left with the scar.

"I'm sorry, Padma," Harry said quietly when Madam Pomfrey left.

"What for, Harry?"

"They took you to get to me... they hurt you to get to me...." Harry hung his head, not wanting to meet her eyes.

"Harry, it's-"

"No. Listen, Padma this isn't right."

"What are you saying?" she whispered.

"I think-"

"PADMA!"

Harry turned sharply as someone approached from behind him. It was two people, a witch and a wizard. The witch had shoulder length brown hair that was tied back into a ponytail and her eyes were deep brown.

She carried herself quickly and had tears in her eyes. The wizard had grey hair that was receding a bit and he was about as tall as Harry was, six foot or so. He looked pale with worry. "Mum, Dad," said Padma.

"Oh, dear. How are you?" cried Mrs. Patil.

"I'm fine, Mum. Madam Pomfrey fixed me up fine."

"They told us you were asleep?" said Mr. Patil.

"I actually only woke up about a quarter of an hour ago. Harry was here, though."

Mr. Patil turned sharply and looked Harry up and down, seeming to notice him for the first time. Mrs. Patil did the same. "What do you think you're doing here?" asked Mr. Patil sharply. Harry looked up and opened his mouth but didn't say anything. "THIS IS YOUR FAULT?" he roared.

"DAD," screamed Padma. "Don't-" But it was too late, Mr. Patil wouldn't be stopped.

"We tried to tell ourselves she would be okay. That she would be fine seeing you. And now look what you caused."

"David...." said Mrs. Patil quietly.

"You could have got her killed, she almost did die-"

"DAD!" shouted Padma.

Mr. Patil stopped shouting and turned to his daughter. She was crying. Harry was painfully aware of the awkward silence in the room. Mrs. Patil was staring at him with tears in her eyes and Padma had them rolling down her cheeks. Though Mr. Patil seemed to be spent.

"Dad," said Padma quietly. "Harry didn't want this to happen, but it did. And when he found out he came and saved me.... you shouldn't be shouting at him, you should be thanking him!"

"What? But he-"

"It was my choice to see Harry, Dad. I knew there were risks but I accepted them."

Mr. Patil sighed heavily and rubbed his eyes with his thumb and forefinger, he seemed to be out of argument. It was Mrs. Patil who spoke next.

"What happened to the Death Eater's who did this?" said Mrs. Patil angrily.

"Well I think I killed one of them," said Harry honestly. "The other two got away, Disapparated."

Mr. and Mrs. Patil seemed shocked. "Killed...."

"I heard something snap when he hit the wall; it was probably his neck...."

"What happened?"

Harry sighed. "He was using the Cruciatus curse on Padma. I disarmed him powerfully and his head hit the wall at an angle."

"The other two..."

"Like I said, they Disapparated."

The room grew silent and Mrs. Patil put her arms around her daughter. With a sigh Harry sat on the edge of the bed. About ten minutes later Parvati came in and hugged her sister. Harry took this as his cue to leave.

Once he was outside he checked his watch, it was two thirty. Everybody was in lessons. Harry tried to think what he would have right now... it would be Charms. He didn't think he could face that right now. Sighing, he headed back to the common room. He knew it would be deserted and it would give him the perfect opportunity to think. Padma needed to be safe and to be safe she needed to be away from him, but how could he leave her when she had defended him so honestly against her own family. Harry sighed again; this was going to take some thought.

Chapter 11 - And All That's In Between

If it is my Fate to suffer; must I suffer alone?

If it is my Destiny to fight; must I fight alone?

*And if it is my privilege to sit in the company
of such good friends, how can I make sure
they survive the coming darkness?*

-- Harry Potter (Unfinished Thoughts)

Harry wandered aimlessly through the well trodden halls of Hogwarts. He was heading back towards the common room, where he could think. *The common room will be deserted* he thought. *No interruptions....*

Harry arrived at the portrait of the Fat Lady and she let him in without question. His eyes briefly swept the room and, as he had hoped, it was empty. Sighing heavily, Harry threw himself down into his favourite armchair by the fire. Without realising he was doing so, he began absently rubbing his scar as his thoughts grew more and more confused.

What am I going to do? he thought. *Everyday things get more and more difficult.... Padma, I can't stay with her.*

And why not? he asked himself.

Too dangerous, for her. She didn't deserve what happened to her and the only way she can be safe is if I end it.

She doesn't want it to end?

...I don't either, but it's for the best. I shouldn't have got close to her in the first place, I should have known all along what it might cause... and now here we are.

Why do I have to do this...? So she doesn't die. This was the simplest answer; he couldn't be responsible for another death. "But does it have to hurt so much?" he asked himself out loud.

It is supposed to hurt... these things always do.

As Harry sat in the chair quietly thinking, he began to practice his neglected animagus skills. It had been a month or so now since McGonagall had had to acquire a Griffin and his other skills had fallen into disuse. He lengthened his limbs and hair, altered his height slightly. After five minutes or so his rusty skills shone like new. He hadn't forgotten them, just hadn't used them and they were still there awaiting him.

He had asked Professor McGonagall the other week if she was having any luck with a griffin and she had speculated that it would take another few weeks, maybe a month to get one. She had said that griffins were extremely rare around the world and there wasn't one anywhere in captivity. It was really a matter of chance if one was found, but she was optimistic it would be.

Harry stood up and shook himself. It had been a long couple of days and his limbs ached from it all. He stood there for a moment, gazing at the fireplace, and promised himself he'd end it with Padma as soon as possible. No point drawing it out. Deciding to have a shower, as he hadn't had one in roughly two days, Harry ambled slowly up the stairs and into the sixth year dorm.

He removed clean clothes and robes from his trunk and picked up his wand that he had accidentally left on his bed that morning. After crossing the landing he entered the bathroom and undressed. The warm spray of the shower felt to Harry, as if all his aches and pains were being washed away. So it was with new strength that he emerged from the bathroom half an hour later, looking and feeling a whole lot better.

It was still a good three hours until dinner and he didn't want to talk to Padma while her parents were there, so Harry was at a loss for something to do. *I could always go to class?* he thought, but then dismissed the idea just as quickly. He settled on an easier task than talking to Padma and that was a three foot Potions essay due tomorrow.

The essay took up the rest of the afternoon, but it was with more than a little satisfaction that Harry set it aside at quarter to six, thinking about Ron and how he had yet to do it. Glancing at his watch he saw the time

and decided to walk slowly down to the Great Hall, by the time he got there everyone should be out of class and on their way to dinner.

Harry stowed his essay away in his bag and began the walk down to the hall. As he walked Harry began to realise just how hungry he really was. He hadn't noticed with Padma being in the hospital but he supposed his last real meal was two days ago. He was starving.

Voldemort threw the Daily Prophet aside with a small smile and then turned to face Wormtail. "This is news indeed, Peter. I believe it may be time to show the world that I truly exist."

"Yes, Master."

"Be ready. I will call all Death Eater's here on the 7th. Our war is about to begin."

"That's great, Harry," said Hermione happily from across the table. "And she's going to be okay?"

"She'll be fine. Left with a bit of a scar, though."

"Oh, dear. As long as she's all right, though."

Harry nodded. "Her parents weren't too pleased. Mr. Patil blamed the whole thing on me...."

"That's awful," said Ginny who was sitting next to Hermione.

Harry raised an eyebrow and looked at her. "Is it? There was a lot of truth in what he was saying." No one said anything as an awkward silence followed Harry's words.

The conversation turned to lighter topics and Harry found himself gazing around the Great Hall. Ron was to his left, complaining about the Potions essay he had to do but at the same time complimenting the apple pie. Ethan sat to his right and, as was his way, wasn't saying much of anything to anyone. He occasionally spoke to Lavender, but for the most

his eyes appeared glazed over and Harry could tell he was lost deep in thought.

Harry looked up to the enchanted ceiling and saw the thunderous storm clouds over head. Forks of lightning ripped across the sky like the brief flash of a camera. Also a small amount of snow was falling slowly. The snow made Harry think of Christmas and how he'd have to buy Christmas presents on the next Hogsmeade weekend, which was supposedly Saturday the 14th.

Deciding he'd think about it later, Harry returned to his plate. Refilling it with some Cumberland sausages and steak. But as he ate he had a thought as to where he might spend Christmas this year. Last year it had been at Grimmauld Place... with Sirius. Harry could still see him singing '*God rest ye, merry Hippogriffs*' at the top of his voice. He smiled sadly at the memory and wiped his eyes angrily, now was neither the time nor the place he told himself sternly. Still, he might be spending it at the Burrow, which would be good he thought.

"I tell you, three feet!" sighed Ron. "We better get back soon if we want to sleep tonight, Harry."

Harry smiled. "Is the apple pie good?"

"Oh yeah, it's excellent," Ron said, passing over the pie dish.

Later that night, Harry was sitting at a table in the back of the room with Ethan. Ron was sitting by the fire, as was Hermione who had taken pity on her boyfriend and was now helping him finish off his Potions essay. Harry watched the two of them and smiled. Ever since they finally came to terms with each others feelings, they hadn't argued between themselves once. Which Harry thought was incredible considering how much bickering they used to do. His gaze flickered across the room and came to rest on Ginny who was sitting with her fifth year friends. She caught his eye and smiled, Harry smiled back but frowned soon after; and to Ginny he appeared to be in deep thought. Though Harry knew he frowned for a different reason.

"Do you want to learn that charm, Harry?" asked Ethan.

Harry looked up. "Hmm? Charm?" He was lost.

"The one to enlarge your pockets magically, you know, keeps certain things hidden."

"Oh yeah, sure. What's the incantation?"

"Casios Engorgio est. It works on any pocket; the only thing is you have to cast the charm on every pocket on every piece of clothing you own. It may take some time."

Harry nodded and pointed his hand, not his wand, at his pocket. "What are you doing?" asked Ethan.

"I was about to enlarge my pocket," said Harry.

"Without a wand?"

Harry opened his mouth to speak, but then stopped. He hadn't even realised he wasn't using his wand; it was just instinct to use his hand. Harry took his wand out of his robes and now pointed that at his jeans pocket. "Casios Engorgio est." A faint purple light issued out of his wand and covered his pocket. It glowed for a moment before disappearing entirely. "Did it work?"

"Looked like it," said Ethan. "Try and put your wand in there, that shouldn't normally fit all the way in."

The spell had worked, his wand slipped into his pocket easily and Harry had to dig deep to find it again. *This could be useful* he thought.

"Have you been to talk to Padma yet?" asked Ethan.

Harry looked up and hesitated before answering. "No. No, not yet. I thought I'd wait till she gets out of the hospital tomorrow."

Ethan nodded and said no more. It wasn't his problem. Harry sighed a moment later and left the table, he walked over to Ron and Hermione, who were in the armchairs.

"Getting through that, Ron?" he asked his best friend who was a good two thirds through his essay.

"Only just..." he grumbled.

Harry smiled slightly and fell into one of the chairs. He yawned and leaned back in the chair. "What've you been up to?" asked Hermione.

"Hmm? Oh! Just talking to Ethan."

"Why don't you bring him over here?"

"All right."

Harry turned to around to face the table he'd just been sitting at. He opened his mouth to say something but stopped before he did. Ethan wasn't there. Harry briefly scanned the common room. Nope. He'd left.

"He's gone?" said Harry.

"He'll be back," mumbled Ron. "Hermione, how many newt legs do you put in the Passius potion?"

"Seven, but they have to be skinned."

Ron wrote that down quickly and then sighed heavily with relief. "Finished," he said triumphantly. Meanwhile, Harry picked up a copy of the Prophet that someone had left in the chair next to him. He quickly glanced at the date and saw it as today's. The main headline was something about the Ministry, but the side column was what caught Harry's attention and he didn't know why it did.

MINISTER TO VISIT DIAGON ALLEY

The Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge will be addressing the public at a special conference in Diagon Alley on this Saturday December 7th. He plans to address the growing concerns of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named and is seeming inactivity over the past few months. (continued page 2)

Harry continued to stare at the article for a moment, it confused him. For some reason he felt happy to read this, but why? He couldn't care less what Fudge was doing, so why did this article hold his attention. He sighed and rubbed his scar with the back of his hand, it was itching slightly.

Harry and Ron went up to bed an hour later. Harry briefly glanced at Ethan's bed, it was empty. He wondered for a moment where he was, but his thoughts were interrupted when Ron spoke.

"What do you think I should get, Hermione, for Christmas, Harry?" he asked.

"Christmas," replied Harry, changing into his pyjamas and pulling the sheets on his bed down. "What do you think she'd want?"

"Dunno? That's why I asked you!"

Harry laughed as he climbed into bed. "How about a book?"

"Nah, it has to be something good now that I'm seeing her. Something special."

"Get her a special book. Something thick, lots of pages..." Harry blew out the light and closed his eyes, it felt good to relax.

"Enough with the damn books, Harry. How's about a nice set of quills?"

"Special quills?" laughed Harry.

"Oh, sod off."

The next morning Harry woke up apprehensively. Today he'd have to talk with Padma. Magical Creatures is when he'd have to do it. She'll be back at lessons now. Harry rolled lazily over in bed and sighed. He had the drapes drawn so he couldn't tell if anyone else was up yet, but he could hear life down in the common room.

An hour later Harry entered the Great Hall with Ron and Hermione, who were already up when he got out of bed. His eyes flickered over to the Ravenclaw table but he couldn't see Padma there. Gloomily he walked down to his usual seat at the table and sat down heavily.

For the next forty five minutes Harry talked scarcely and picked at his food half heartedly. Mostly he was thinking. He liked Padma, he liked her a lot but he couldn't stay with her. Not while Voldemort lived. He'd rather not be with her and see her alive than be with her and risk her death. It had to be done.

The walk down to Hagrid's hut seemed to take an hour; Harry's stomach squirmed nervously when he saw Padma walking happily with her Ravenclaw friends. She smiled and waved when she saw him and Harry sighed, but waved as well. They found Hagrid waiting by the pen with the chimera in it. The beast was sleeping.

"Righ' now. Good morning ter yer all. Not doing much terday, jus make a sketch of the chimera and write a small bit abou' it."

There was some scurrying as people picked quills and parchment out of their bags and went to find a place to sit. Harry followed Ron and Hermione over to a tree near the pen and watched Padma sit with her friends about twenty metres away on a small mound of ground.

He watched her for a moment before turning to Ron and Hermione. "I'll-I'll be back in a minute." Without saying anything else Harry turned away and walked determinately towards Padma, deciding it was time to do it.

"Padma," he said when he reached her. "Can I... can I talk to you please."

She nodded but didn't say anything. Harry thought she might have guessed what he was doing. The two of them walked away from the class and sat down on a large flat rock near Hagrid's hut. Neither of them spoke for a moment and Harry stared sadly at the stormy sky while kicking the snow around with his feet. It wasn't that deep yet, but the biggest falls were yet to come.

"Harry...?"

"It has to end, Padma," he said quickly and turned away. "I'm sorry...."

Harry waited for a response. He didn't know what to expect. Maybe she would shout, cry in anger or sadness. He hadn't expected her to do absolutely nothing. Harry continued. "I didn't want it to end like this... I'm sorry this has to happen, Padma but I- it's for... it's for the best." Harry sighed and held his head in his hands. After a moment he turned and looked at Padma. She had tears in her eyes and was obviously on the verge of crying.

"Harry, I...." A single tear fell down her face. "I know...." That made him

jump, he hadn't expected her to agree with him. "I know it has to end. I don't want it to... but I suppose it has to."

Harry nodded and ran his hand through his hair. "I'm sorry this all happened, Padma."

"Don't be. I haven't... haven't known you very long, Harry. But in the time I have known you I've seen things that tell me you're hiding something. Something important. Like the reason why you could do that magic with the lights in the hospital. Or the reason that You-Know-Who tried to kill you.... and me. I think it would be better for everyone if you can solve whatever it is on your own, without having to worry about me...."

Harry nodded silently. *Was I that transparent?* he thought. *Damn prophecy....*

"We still friends?" he asked softly.

Padma smiled. "Of course we are," she said grasping his hand and leaning over to kiss him on the cheek. "Take care of yourself, Harry."

Harry sighed as he let go of her hand. He sat in thought for a moment and watched Padma walk slowly back over to her friends. As he stood, Harry removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes with his hand. *To be normal* he thought, not for the last time.

The day didn't get better after Magical Creatures. Ron and Hermione, who realised Harry had ended it with Padma, could tell he didn't want to talk about it and gave him a wide berth. Which just annoyed Harry. The day turned from bad to worse after lunch, as the realisation hit home that he would now be spending the afternoon in the Potions dungeon with Snape.

After he and Ron handed in their essays, they set about to work on their potion. As was Snape's way, he had set a most difficult one to be handed in at the end of the lesson. Harry needed to pass this assessment to stay in the class, and he needed to stay in the class to be able to enter Auror training. So it took Harry is all to ignore Snape's snide comments and insults. Though he did find himself wishing again and again that this day would end.

"Three spoons, Harry," said Ron quickly as Harry was about to pour a fourth spoon of powdered Slikt to the mix.

"Sorry..." mumbled Harry absently. He had been thinking about his life in general, and wasn't paying much attention to the potion, when he really should be. It didn't take him long to fall back into his thoughts, though. *Why... why me? Who am I to deserve this life? Everyday it gets worse....*

"HARRY!" shouted Ron. "Medium flame, medium."

Harry was once again pulled out of his thoughts and fixed the flame quickly, but not quick enough before Snape saw it.

"Honestly, Potter," spat Snape, moving over to their desk, causing everyone in the dungeon to turn around, Malfoy and the Slytherins especially. They all looked gleeful. The Gryffindors turned as well, but they looked on sadly as Snape once again belittled Harry. "Honestly, Potter is it beyond your reach to create a simple consciousness potion?"

"Simple?" asked Harry raising an eyebrow.

"Yes, Potter, simple. Do you want me to spell it out for you?"

Harry gritted his teeth as he felt the anger and immense hate well up in him at the sight of the man in front of him. He glared at Snape for a moment and then jumped a little as he felt a little electric shock in his left hand. He looked down briefly to see faint crackles of lightning emanating and swirling across the back of his hand and fingers. Harry swore inwardly, he was getting to angry, his magic was responding. He took a deep breath and looked back at Snape.

When he spoke, he did so calmly, without any trace of emotion. "Not today, Snape. I'm not in the mood for your bitterness...."

A stunned silence followed these words. Hermione gasped and Ron turned a slighter whiter shade of white. Harry saw Malfoy and the Slytherins waiting with baited breath, wondering how Snape was going to take this. Harry stared straight at Snape, he didn't regret what he'd said, in fact it had made him feel good to finally say something to wipe the sneer off the greasy git's face.

The sneer was replaced a second later and Harry waited for Snape to lose it. But he didn't. After about half a minute or so of staring straight at Harry, he smirked as if something had just been confirmed, before turning away.

"Get back to your potions, He spat, striding away, his robes swirling out behind him. "And thirty points for your cheek, Potter."

Harry blinked and looked away. As everyone in the room stared in disbelief. Malfoy looked on in shock and Ron let out a long held breath. Eventually everyone turned back to their work, whispering between themselves quietly. But as Harry added his dragon's blood to the mix, he couldn't help but think that that had been worth thirty points.

The rest of that week past without incident. Harry did his best to keep up the façade that he wore daily, but the strain was getting to him. He kept everything hidden, hidden from his friends, hidden from everyone and it was getting to him. The last few months had been the worst in his entire life, and it showed no sign of ending anytime soon. Nothing in the war showed any sign of ending. And it was about to get a whole lot worse....

Harry woke up early Saturday morning; he woke up feeling excited, eager, and tense. All these feelings had nothing to do with his current mood, which was a miserable one, so Harry thought they may have been Voldemort's Which made him wonder why Voldemort would be eager and excited? It passed as soon as it came though and Harry jumped out of bed and hopped into the shower.

After breakfast, he, Ron and Hermione went and sat back in the common room. It was snowing heavily today and when it stopped it would be several feet thick. So the common room it was for today.

When Harry entered he saw Ethan sitting at a table in the back of the room with Seamus, Dean, Lavender, Parvati and Neville. Parvati and Harry had come to a silent agreement not to mention their argument in the hospital wing. She was still his friend, and he was still hers. Harry, Ron and Hermione pulled some chairs over and joined the group.

Harry talked with the group for a few minutes but his attention was soon drawn to a copy of the Prophet on the table, it was the same one he read

a few days ago. And, as with last time, his gaze lingered on the brief article about Fudge visiting Diagon Alley on Saturday, today. As he read it, Harry felt the same feelings he had when he woke up. Eagerness, excitement, and he didn't know why.

"Present your arm, Wormtail," ordered Voldemort.

Pettigrew did as he was told. He bit his lip against the coming pain and tensed his arm muscles. Voldemort lazily removed his wand from within his dark robes and placed the tip on the Dark Mark burnt into Wormtail's skin. The pain came instantly and he let out a small cry. The smell of burning flesh filled the air.

And every single Death Eater in the United Kingdom, burnt along with him.

Harry threw the Prophet aside, and let the article slip his mind. *Fudge would probably be there now* he thought. *Talking rubbish about-*

Harry jumped as someone let out a cry down the other end of the table. He looked up and saw Ethan shaking his arm, biting his lip. Something obviously hurt. "What's the matter?" asked Harry.

Rafe looked up quickly. "Nothing... just... just banged my elbow against the table. Hurts a bit." It was a lie thought Rafe, but everyone seemed to except it. His Dark Mark was burning; *he* was calling his Death Eater's. He put his arm at his side and tried to keep a straight face as it burned.

"Welcome to Diagon Alley," said Fudge, his voice magically amplified over the crowd, "I especially welcome the members of the press, who will finally be learning the truth over the current state of events."

The Minister of Magic looked out over the crowds. There were about three hundred people packed into the square where a special stage had been erected for the event. Fudge continued. "As most of you know,

He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named has returned to this country and is once again gathering power." A hush fell over the crowd. "I can tell you today, in total honesty, that were he to attack our Auror division is more than capable of stopping anything he has. You are safe. This time we are better prepared, we are....

As Fudge spoke, and as the crowd soaked up every word and took it in as truth, mainly out of desperation because it was what they wanted to hear, nobody noticed the growing number of black cloaked figures, deep in the back of the crowd. No one noticed a thing....

Harry talked absently to his friends. He had a feeling in the pit of his stomach, a nervous feeling, an apprehensive feeling. And his scar was starting to prickle; he could feel a headache coming on. He barely heard the conversation around him and blinked to try and clear his head, his vision had gone all blurry... but not quite so. He saw the common room in front of him, but he also saw the pale outline of a building on the edge of his vision. Like he was looking through two sets of eyes at the same time. He swayed in his chair and nearly fell off as his vision continued to blur.

"Harry, Harry, HARRY!"

He snapped his head up and tried to focus on the person speaking, the only problem was he couldn't tell who it was. "Who... I feel...."

"Are you okay?"

"Ron...? Is that-" And then it happened. His vision went entirely and his scar ripped into his skull. Harry screamed and jerked backwards, falling off his chair and onto the floor in the process. The last thing he saw was the rush of people's feet and then blackness.

Harry instantly knew where he was. Diagon Alley, he'd recognise it anywhere, even now... even now. He raised his hand, his white bony hand, and fired the killing curse into the back of the closest innocent wizard. The human part of him, his consciousness, his mind cried out in anger and pain. But the demon, the monster he was fused with, Lord Voldemort laughed manically as the man fell to the floor dead.

He watched as it took the crowd a moment to process what it had just heard and seen. And when it did, the chaos began. Fudge's words of a moment ago were forgotten as the very thing that haunted their world, revealed itself fully for the first time in sixteen years. They ran, the basic instinct of survival kicking in as the suffering started.

Voldemort/Harry cut his way through the crowd, moving briskly towards the stage. The two hundred or so Death Eater's that came with him took care of the rest of the crowd, and those foolish enough to fight back. Some of the smarter ones Apparated away, and Harry cried in relief as he saw Alicia Spinnet do so. The last thing he saw before it all grew dark was the explosion of one of the shops, as the Dark Mark rose high in dark green flames.

Harry opened his eyes and screamed. He looked around wildly and found himself back in the common room. Everyone was staring at him fearfully, only a few knew what had happened to him, and they were already leaping into action.

"HARRY!" shouted Ron. "CAN YOU HEAR ME?"

"I can hear you..." he croaked, wiping some blood out of his eye. The scar must have opened again.

"Hermione's gone for help, she'll-"

"NO, NO TIME," interrupted Harry. "Have to... have to get me to Dumbledore... help lift me...."

"Just stay still, Harry."

"NO!" Harry could feel his vision going again. He was slipping back into the demon. "Help me now."

Harry tried to stand on his own and could barely manage it. Ron rushed forward and grabbed his arm as he swayed. "All right. Dumbledore it is.... SOMEONE HELP?"

Harry was vaguely aware of Ethan grasping his other arm and then half

walking, and been half carried towards the portrait hole door. *They have to know now he thought their being slaughtered...*

His vision grew darker and darker as the halls of Hogwarts reeled by. After two minutes of stumbling along he couldn't walk anymore, and Ron and Ethan were trying to keep him on his feet, while still moving towards Dumbledore's office with as much speed as humanly possible. It was about halfway there, that Harry fell back into his nightmare.

The streets were littered with the bodies of the dead. Blood ran across the once proud, clean streets. Pureblood, half-blood, Muggle born...? It didn't matter... Harry thought it all looked the same now. The crowds were still fighting to get out, as the Death eater's slaughtered one after another mercilessly. Several of the buildings were on fire, and the smell of death and ash was heavy on the air.

Harry/Voldemort moved strongly through the crowd. Towards the stage were a dozen or so brave Aurors were doing their best to protect Fudge from the attack, the Minister was looking around in sheer horror as his promises were broken in the most violent and gruesome way. His eyes flew over the bodies of the innocent and the bodies of the Death Eater's and he felt all hope leave him. One of the Aurors to his right was enveloped in green light, and was dead before he hit the ground.

Finally Fudge's eyes fell on the Dark Lord and he felt the worst fear in his life, as he looked into the eyes of Death and saw them looking straight back at him.

Harry fell back into his own body. The first thing he noticed was that he couldn't open his right eye; it was crusted over with blood, wedged shut. With his good eye he saw that they were approaching the gargoyle that guarded Dumbledore's office. He was vaguely aware of the pain in his forehead as he tried to keep himself within himself. Dumbledore needed to know. It can't have been more than seven or eight minutes since the massacre began, and the headmaster couldn't know.

He realised that they had been standing outside the gargoyle for longer than was necessary, he heard Ron shouting out the names of his favourite sweets and Harry was confused for a moment, before in some small corner of his mind he realised they didn't know the password.

He summed up as much strength as he could and wearily said the right words. "Skiving Snackbox," he croaked, before passing out for a moment. When he opened his eyes again he saw the ancient face of the headmaster looking down on him. It took him a moment to remember... anything, and when he did he began to feel his vision slipping again, Voldemort was drawing him back.

With his last ounce of strength Harry grabbed the headmaster's robes and whispered three words. "Diagon Alley.... attacked...." His head fell limply to the left and he saw Ron for a second before he was back inside the monster.

Harry saw Cornelius Fudge on his knees in front of him, his face quivering, his eyes wide with fear. The wood on the stage around him was stained red with the spilt blood of his now dead protectors. He heard that evil laugh come from within Voldemort, felt the emotions of the Dark Lord. And then he spoke.

Voldemort surveyed the miserable excuse of a man in front of him with disgust, but he would be dead soon, so no matter. "This world is mine, Fudge," he hissed. "With your death this country will have no one to look to. It will be chaos, and it will be mine for the taking."

Harry watched with sorrow as Fudge started to cry. Whatever he previously may have felt about Fudge, that was forgotten now.... no one deserved this. "Have you nothing to say, *Minister*?" sneered Voldemort/Harry.

Fudge looked up into the face of the Dark Lord, Harry watched helplessly as he spoke, knowing his death was mere moments away. "You... you won't win...."

Voldemort laughed again. "No....? Who is there to stand against me?

Who is there to challenge the power of Lord Voldemort?"

Even now, faced with that very evil Fudge cringed at the name, but he still spoke. Harry felt a deep admiration for Cornelius Fudge after what he said next. "Dumbledore will fight you....."

Harry felt Voldemort's emotion of anger and smiled bitterly, Fudge had touched a nerve. "Dumbledore," he spat, "Dumbledore is an old fool hiding behind the protection of his school. My power far outweighs his. He will die and I will reign! No one can stop me once he is gone. No one would dare stand alone against me!"

Fudge blinked and then, he spoke one final time. He said one word and that was all. "Potter." He said it sincerely, without any doubt in his voice.

Harry cried out from within his mind as his emotion of bravery mingled with that of Voldemort's anger. Fudge had named him, he had *named* him. He had placed a dying man's final hope for his world with him, and, although Harry could feel himself slipping away again, he wished Cornelius Fudge the best, no matter where he ended up. The last thing he felt was an explosion of anger from within the Dark Lord. And the last thing he saw was the green light that ended the Minister of Magic's life.

Chapter 12 - Aftermath

Future years will never know the seething hell and the black infernal background, the countless minor scenes and interiors of the war; and is it best they should not. The real war will never get in to the books...

--Walt Whitman

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Harry awoke several hours later and all was dark. He tried to look around but found himself unable to. It was pitch black and he wasn't wearing his glasses, he was effectively blind, and it unsettled him. It took Harry a moment to realise he was in the hospital wing, he'd recognise that bed frame anywhere, and then it took him another moment to remember why he was here.

In that bittersweet moment of realisation Harry jumped up out of his bed, ignoring the pounding headache he had, and raised his right arm. "Lumos!" he said. Light flared from his hand and lit up the room. He made his way towards the door as fast as possible.

Harry walked, half jogged, through the halls of Hogwarts. He had to get to Dumbledore's office. He had to know what was going on. As he walked he glanced at his watch, it was 10:30 and it was still Saturday. He also noticed that he was wearing a pair of those horrible striped hospital pyjamas. Without a second thought he waved his hand and muttered a small incantation, his pyjamas became a black shirt and jeans.

He arrived at Dumbledore's office ten minutes later and quickly passed the gargoyles and ascended the stairs. He was about to knock when he heard the voices of people speaking from within.

"But, Albus. We have to get someone on our side into power. God knows You-Know-Who is going to try and get a Death Eater as the next

Minister."

"I agree, Minerva," said the tired and weary voice of Dumbledore. "But who would take the job now?"

The voices died down and no one seemed to have an answer to Dumbledore's question. Harry took this chance to knock. He did so three times. "Come in," said Dumbledore.

Harry opened the door slowly and stepped through just as slow. As soon as he was in he looked around at the crowded room and recognised several faces of the dozen or so people packed into Dumbledore's office. He saw Moody, Snape, Tonks, McGonagall, Kingsley Shacklebolt, Remus, Dumbledore of course, and tiny Professor Flitwick. There were also about six people he didn't recognise.

"How are you, Harry?" asked Dumbledore as soon as he entered.

Harry turned to face the headmaster. "I'm fine... what's going on?"

Dumbledore smiled with a small amount of amusement, but it didn't reach his eyes and Snape glared at him for the bluntness of his question. Every eye in the room was also on him, several were staring adamantly at his forehead, which Harry found very annoying and distracting. "Allow me to introduce the inner circle of the Order of the Phoenix, Harry. Some you know, others you don't."

Harry nodded to the room in general but soon found himself looking back into Dumbledore's face. "How bad is it....?"

The silence was immense for a moment but Dumbledore finally broke it. "Two hundred and thirty four dead, including Cornelius Fudge. One hundred and ninety seven innocent bystanders and thirty seven Death Eater's...."

"Only thirty seven! But I counted at least two hundred there?"

Several people in the room gasped and Tonks let out a low whistle. One of the witches Harry didn't know spoke first. "How could you know how many were there?"

Harry swore inwardly. Apparently his connection with Voldemort wasn't even made totally clear, even to the inner circle of the Order. Harry looked at Dumbledore before answering and saw the headmaster give the slightest of nods. He sighed and then turned to the witch that had spoken. "I- Whenever Voldemort-" Most people in the room gasped at the name. Everyone except Dumbledore, Moody, and Remus. Harry had no patience for this. "Oh come on," he said. "Get a hold of yourselves, it's just a name. Anyway, whenever Voldemort is feeling a strong emotion, or whenever he's hurting someone. I feel it in my scar... or... or sometimes I enter his mind and see through his eyes." Half the room stood with their mouths hanging open in shock. "That's how I knew how many were at Diagon Alley... I saw it all."

Everyone turned to Dumbledore, looking at him for confirmation of Harry's story. Which most of them found hard to believe. There were a few that knew of course, Remus for one. Dumbledore spoke directly to Harry, though. "Could you please tell us what you saw, Harry. Did you recognise any of the Death Eater's?"

Harry was silent for a moment as he thought about what he had seen. And then he jumped into the story from the moment he first collapsed in the common room. He told the Order about his slipping between his and Voldemort's bodies, about the innocent people he saw cut down, and he mentioned as much as he could about the Death Eater's. No one spoke as he did, no one dared interrupt him. They had all been and seen the street after Voldemort had left. It was a massacre, and Harry was reciting what they had seen.

"...and then Voldemort laughed and said Dumbledore couldn't defeat him. He then pointed his wand directly between Fudge's eyes and said something like; 'no one would dare stand alone against him....' And then Fudge said that I would. That angered Voldemort and before I slipped again I saw the killing curse hit Fudge...."

Harry finished talking and sat heavily down in a nearby chair, his head in his hands. No one in the room seemed to have anything to say. Harry only looked up when he felt a hand on his shoulder. It was Remus and he was standing by him. Harry smiled and silently nodded to his father's old friend. He then found new strength and spoke again. "What happens

now?"

Every head turned to Dumbledore as he spoke. "We begin trying to piece our government back together. Fudge's death will cause panic and fear. He must be replaced soon, by someone strong and on our side," stated Dumbledore clearly.

Now every head turned back to Harry, it appeared everyone hoped that Harry and Dumbledore would solve this problem for them. Harry ignored them and spoke only to Dumbledore. "I don't think anyone will want the job. Not after what happened to Fudge. Whoever becomes the next Minister is either going to be incredibly brave... or a Death Eater."

Dumbledore nodded solemnly as the Order turned back to him. "There is one who might take the job, if we showed him there was no other way...."

"Who?" asked Tonks quickly.

"Arthur Weasley," said Dumbledore.

There was silence as everyone in the room considered this. Harry was shocked. *Could Mr. Weasley be the Minister of Magic...?*

"Well he'd have my vote," barked Moody.

"And mine," agreed Kingsley.

"He's perfect for it," said Lupin stepping forward. "He's on our side, he's a member of the inner circle, and what's more he is a good man. And after what he did today he'll have unwavering public support."

"What did he do today?" asked Harry.

Remus turned to look down at him. "He was the only Head of Department who would go to Diagon Alley after the attack; all the others were too scared. Thought of themselves as targets. Arthur was one of the first on the scene helping the wounded and getting everything under control."

"We'll have to be quick," said one of the wizard's Harry didn't know. "Some of the other Heads will soon figure out they can get into power if they act fast enough."

"True," agreed several other people.

"It is unanimous then?" asked Dumbledore. Everyone in the room nodded. "Good. Then I will go see Arthur immediately. Please everyone do what you do best, we have to get some good news in the Prophet."

Everyone said their goodbyes and began to leave the room in two's and three's, until it was only Harry, Remus and Dumbledore left.

"I'll see you soon, Harry," said Lupin. "Take care of yourself."

"You too. Goodbye, Remus."

Lupin left, leaving only Harry and Dumbledore in the office. Harry stood as Dumbledore rose from his chair and walked around the desk to meet him. "Are you sure everything is okay, Harry?" he asked.

"No... But I'll be right. I'm going to go sleep off this headache. Goodnight, sir."

Dumbledore smiled and placed a hand on Harry's shoulder. "Goodnight, Harry."

Harry turned and walked away towards the exit. He stopped halfway though and turned back around. "Do you think Mr. Weasley will try to get the job?" he asked.

Dumbledore appeared thoughtful. "I'm not sure, Harry. I'm going to see him now, so I expect it will be in tomorrow's edition of the Prophet if he did."

Harry nodded and said goodbye again before heading back to the common room. On the way he glanced at his watch, it was gone midnight. He'd been in Dumbledore's office for over an hour and a half. He sighed and tried to clear his mind as he walked. Too many thoughts all jumbled together, and now it was all mixed with an overwhelming feeling of sorrow and anger at what had happened today.

Harry walked into the bathroom as he came to it and the magical lights inside sprang to life as he passed them. He stopped at the mirror and looked at his reflection. He looked tired, tired beyond belief. He tenderly

touched his scar but regretted it a moment later as the scab that barely had a chance to heal before it opened again twinged with pain. Harry let out a deep breath and turned the taps on to splash his face. The freezing water was like a new awakening to Harry; he left the bathroom and continued his walk back to the common room.

When Harry got there he could feel the tension in the air, the pain. Something wasn't right. "It's not good," said the Fat Lady sadly as Harry said the password and apprehensively entered the common room.

The first thing he noticed was that it was quiet. That would have been normal on any other night at this time because most would be in bed, but the common room was pretty much full with only a few upstairs in the dorms. Everyone was talking in hushed whispers and some were crying.

Harry saw one of the first years sitting in an armchair by the fire, her arms around her legs as she cried. Hermione was sitting next to her, holding one of her hands and whispering small condolences. Most followed Harry's progress across the room and the whispers increased as he made it to the table that Ron was sitting at and sat down next to him.

"How are you, mate?" asked Ron.

"As well as to be expected." Harry thought he was using that answer way too much. "What's the matter with that little girl....?"

Ron sighed and brushed a hand nervously through his flame red hair. "Her parents were in the crowd.... they both... died." Harry swore under his breath and looked over to the child, she was only little, no more than eleven and now she was an orphan. "She's not the only one. Seamus lost an uncle, he's upstairs in the dorm. And a third year lost his brother, he went home."

"Is anyone with, Seamus?"

Ron smiled sadly. "Dean pulled out some Muggle drink from his trunk. Jim Beam or something like that? He and Seamus are probably passed out by now...."

Harry nodded. "Is that the Evening Prophet?" he asked seeing the paper

next to Ron. Ron nodded and passed the paper to Harry. He quickly skimmed the front page. It was all about the attack, and, Harry noticed, some of it complimented Mr. Weasley on showing up when no other Ministry Head would. *That could help if he decides to go for the job* thought Harry.

Harry sighed and put the paper down. "Why don't you get to bed, Harry. You look like you could pass out at any moment."

Harry nodded and stood up wearily. The last twenty four hours were catching up to him and he was losing the battle to keep his eyes open. He said a brief goodnight to Ron and nodded to Hermione across the room. Ginny smiled sadly as he passed her and he nodded to her as well. Once he entered the dorm he found Dean and Seamus to be asleep, as was Neville. He looked over to Ethan's bed to find it empty, and then wondered where he was because he couldn't remember seeing him in the common room. His thoughts were soon lost though as his head hit the pillow and sleep took him away to his nightmares.

When Harry woke the next day, the first thing he saw was the slow rhythmic fall of fresh snow out of his window. It took him a moment to pass from sleep into awakening and it was those sweet moments that he craved of a morning. The small seconds in between waking up and remembering everything. It was in those few moments of time that he was completely oblivious to the world around him. He didn't have any problems; he just had his mind to himself. Of course it only lasted a few seconds before it came crashing down and he was left with the pain and suffering that is life entailed.

Harry sat up and stretched his arms above his head; he glanced at the clock over on the far wall as he did. He wasn't that surprised to find that he had slept through most of the day and it was now two in the afternoon. He stretched one more time and then yawned. Replacing his glasses and picking up his wand from the bedside table, Harry grabbed some clothes from his trunk and headed towards the showers.

Half an hour later he descended the stairs and entered the common room. It was Sunday and most people were just talking quietly amongst themselves, finishing some homework, playing chess. Trying to get back

into a routine of normality that Voldemort had taken away.

He found Hermione sitting in an armchair with a thick tome resting on her legs. He went and sat in the chair next to her. "Hello," he said quietly.

She looked up and smiled slightly, Harry saw her eyes were bloodshot, she'd been crying. "About time you woke up."

"Is everything okay?"

"Yes, Harry. I'll be fine."

Harry nodded and began playing with a small ball of magic he had conjured between his hands. "Where's Ron?"

Hermione smiled genuinely this time. "He's gone to the Owlery. Here, read this morning's Prophet." She handed him the paper from down the side of her chair and Harry took it.

ARTHUR WEASLEY ACCEPTS POSITION AS ACTING MINISTER

Following the devastating attacks on Diagon Alley yesterday, and the tragic death of our Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge, the Ministry officials have voted Head of the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts Office, Arthur Weasley as the acting Minister of Magic until such time as a proper public vote can take place. Though most feel confident that Acting-Minister Weasley will win that vote as well.

Arthur Weasley showed tremendous bravery in the aftermath of yesterday's horrible attacks, being the only department Head to rush to the wounded at Diagon Alley. Acting-Minister Weasley has already contacted the French government with a call for aid and some French Aurors to be brought in to train the extra number of new recruits in the division. Many see this move as the first step against You-Know-Who in this Dark War. France's response is expected later today.

Meanwhile, clean up has already been completed in Diagon Alley and a special memorial has been placed in the centre of the square with the names of the dead engraved upon it. Acting-Minister Weasley(Continued page 2)

Harry folded the paper and put it down. "What did Ron say to that?"

Hermione laughed slightly. "First he wanted to be pinched to see if he was awake, then he was in denial, then he was angry, before acceptance came crashing down and he went to the Owlery to send a congratulations note to his dad."

"And Ginny?"

"She went with him."

Harry fell silent and looked around at the sad faces in the common room. No one was really saying much of anything. *And who could blame them* thought Harry. Yesterday it hit home to most of them that the wizarding world *is* at war, and some of them have now already lost someone they hold dear. It was a goddamn tragedy.

Looking around the common room again, Harry frowned. "Have you seen, Ethan lately?" he asked Hermione.

She looked up again from her book and quickly scanned the common room. "No... Last time I saw him would have been last night, after he read the evening edition of the Prophet he just stormed out... didn't say a word...?"

Harry clicked his tongue and looked around again before standing up. "I'll be back later. Tell Ron for me."

Hermione nodded and her brow furrowed with confusion. "Where are you going?"

"See a man about his past...." Without any further explanation than that Harry walked out of the common room. Once outside, he began to think about where he would find Rafe. Several possibilities came to mind but there was only one problem; he didn't know Ethan very well... he could be anywhere?

Harry's thoughts led him to the entrance hall of the castle, and his gaze lingered on the solid oak door that led out into the grounds. And then a thought came to him. *It seemed the most likely place... but what if he wasn't there...?*

Deciding that there was a higher chance of Ethan being there than not, Harry opened the door to the castle and headed out into the grounds, towards the Whomping Willow. The first thing that hit him was the cold. He was wearing black jeans a shirt and a new jumper that he had bought several months ago in Diagon Alley, after the Dementor attack. He needed something extra as the snow was falling heavily and biting at his face. Bringing his hand up to his jumper, Harry muttered a small spell and the jumper transfigured itself into a long sweeping green cloak with a hood. With the hood drawn across his face, it provided enough protection against the cold. After five minutes he came to the willow tree. Harry quickly ducked underneath one of its low hanging branches and kicked the root to stop the tree swaying. He entered the dark tunnel.

It wasn't as cold in the tunnel as it was outside, and obviously it wasn't snowing, so Harry lowered the hood on his transfigured cloak. He moved swiftly along the tunnel, not wasting any time. It was extremely dark most of the way, so, as usual; he lit his wand and ran ahead into the darkness.

After half an hour or so, Harry saw the entrance to the shack up ahead and jogged the rest of the way. He entered quickly, silently, with his wand out, not knowing what to expect. He walked carefully through the old shack, his eyes briefly flickering to the stairs where he had found Wormtail the last time he was here.

Light filtered in through the cracks in the doors and windows, bringing snow with it. Harry approached the 'living' room with caution, a few of the snowflakes hitting him on the cheek as he passed a window. When he entered he realised several things at once. One, he'd been right, and two, Ethan was here.

Rafe was stretched out on the old sofa, his eyes closed in sleep. Harry lowered his wand and walked over quickly, pocketing it as he went. Ethan didn't move as he approached, he was definitely asleep. Harry sighed and reached out towards his shoulder with his hand, to shake him awake. He didn't get within half a metre before Rafe's eyes opened suddenly and locked with his.

Too fast for Harry to see, let alone dodge, Ethan sprang forth from the sofa and knocked Harry to the floor. He landed hard and felt all the air

get knocked out of him. It was worsened a moment later as Rafe fell on top of him. Harry struggled to breathe as Ethan pushed his forearm against his throat. With a cry Harry brought his right fist around and knocked it across Rafe's jaw, he fell off and Harry gratefully gulped in some air, his lungs burning the whole time.

Coughing heavily, Harry looked across the floor to Rafe. He was starting to pick himself up and was groaning loudly. "What- the hell were you doing...?" coughed Harry.

Rafe fell back on his knees and looked at Harry. He wiped some blood away from his mouth before speaking. "Sorry," he said.

Harry blinked. "Sorry?"

Rafe sighed and rubbed his face with his hands. "You woke me up, didn't recognise you. Sorry." He yawned.

Harry breathed in heavily and got to his feet steadily. He gave Ethan a moment to do the same before turning to talk. "You been here all day?" he asked roughly.

Ethan nodded. "And last night...."

"It would have been freezing!"

Rafe shrugged and muttered something about a heating charm before sitting back down on the sofa, his head in his hands.

Harry didn't know what to say. Ethan was definitely in a bad way. He'd spent the better part of a day alone in the shack and was, from what Harry could tell, only just keeping it together. "What's the matter...?"

It was an obvious question, a simple one as well. Harry really didn't expect an answer but after half a minute or so Ethan spoke.

"What do you know about your parents, Harry?"

Harry hesitated for a moment. "Not much. They were good people, they had their faults... but I was robbed of them before I could get a chance to find out for myself. Why?"

Rafe stared straight ahead of himself, seemingly at nothing. "My mother died giving birth to me," he said, "my father a year later..." There was no emotion in his voice, just a simple statement of the facts.

"I'm sorry," said Harry honestly.

Ethan laughed bitterly. "Don't be. I know what kind of people they were. My father... the world was better off without him...." Harry didn't say anything to this but his brow furrowed in confusion. "And it would have been better for me if I'd never known who he was," shouted Ethan, who jumped to his feet as he said the last few words.

"Who was he...?"

Ethan smiled grimly. "I'm going to Diagon Alley," he said quietly, and with a nod to Harry he Apparated away with a small pop.

Harry was shocked for a moment before he stood up to and looked around himself. Ethan had gone? Apparently he'd gone to Diagon Alley, of all places. He'd just left, apparated away. Harry withdrew his wand from the inside pocket of his cloak but then hesitated for a moment. *Should I go...?* he thought. He debated with himself for a few minutes before taking a deep breath and decided to follow Ethan.

He pictured Diagon Alley clearly in his mind. Especially the Apparation point, he'd seen it many times from his many visits to the alley. With every thought on Diagon Alley, Harry closed his eyes and said the word. "Apyraceus!"

It was instant. Harry felt nothing and was sure it hadn't worked when he opened his eyes. But what greeted him were the familiar streets of Diagon Alley. Although they weren't that familiar. One thing he noticed was that the place was practically deserted. He could only see two other people in the street and one of them was Ethan.

"Didn't think you were going to come," he said as Harry stepped away from the Apparation point and drew level with Ethan.

"I don't know why I did?" muttered Harry, pulling the hood of his green cloak over his head so as not to be recognised. Not that there was much chance of that.

Rafe didn't say anything but turned away and began to walk down the street. Neither of them talked as they past shop after empty shop. Some had signs in the window; *Closed until further notice. For Sale.* Things like that. One or two shops were actually open, but they were empty... no one wanted to shop, they just wanted to hide.

Harry and Ethan passed Weasley's Wizard Wheezes and he briefly wondered if Fred and George were all right, but relaxed a moment later when he realised he would have heard if they weren't. The sound of their shoes against the cobblestone echoed loudly down the street and anyone they passed, and there were a few, looked them up and suspiciously and cradled their wand in their hands. Harry found himself holding his all the more tighter, as was Ethan.

Harry noticed they had begun to pass into the area where the attack happened. He recognised the area; he saw the ashes of all that remained of a once proud shop. There were still some red stains on the stone, and Harry found himself turning away sadly. They entered the square.

It was quiet, horribly so. And Harry could feel the magic in the air, it was still strong, even after a day the amount of magic in the air was incredible. He could almost taste it. Ethan didn't seem to notice it though as he carried on walking over to where the stage had been yesterday. It drew Harry's gaze and for a brief moment he had a sharp flashback of Cornelius Fudge on his knees, surrounded by slaughtered Aurors. But the stage was gone, and in its place was the memorial the Prophet had mentioned.

Harry and Ethan stood there now. It was made of gilded bronze and was attached to the wall behind it. Names upon names were carved into the bronze, Harry recognised one or two. Next to the name was the date of birth, and then date of death. Sadly death was all the same. Across the top of the plaque were a few words;

Here are the names of the brave,

That died, December 7th 1996, in the

Diagon Alley massacre of the

Second Dark War.

NEVER FORGET

Harry's eyes swept over the one hundred and ninety seven names on the wall. He picked out Fudge from the list and lowered his head slightly, though no one would be able to tell because he was under the hood.

"What did they die for?" whispered Rafe.

Harry didn't have answer. *What did they die for...? Nothing... just victims in a war of death... no meaning whatsoever....*

"What does this accomplish...?" Rafe spoke again. "Hundreds dead because of him...."

Harry looked up as Rafe said this. He saw a sadness in Rafe's eyes that few would ever see in anyone's. A sadness and anger. "Casualties of War..." mumbled Harry, remembering what Remus had said after the Dementor attack. "But it shouldn't happen..."

"No it shouldn't," agreed Ethan with a great conviction in his voice. "Look at them all. Look at the date on that one, she was six!"

Harry sighed and closed his eyes. Twenty four hours ago two hundred people had lain dead on this street, now it was just a memory. The first count in a war that promised to claim a lot more.

"We are all going too die!" said Ethan bitterly, turning away from the wall. "And I might welcome it when it comes...."

Harry didn't turn to face Ethan when he spoke. "You want to die?"

"Better than living in a world where this needless slaughter can take place...."

"Maybe..."

Both of them fell silent, the weight of the world weighing down upon them. Harry looked around the square and had brief flashes of where he'd seen a person die. It haunted him. "Or... or you could fight it?" Ethan said quietly.

"I am fighting it. Trying my best to stop these things from happening... but they still do."

"Then why bother to try at all?"

"Because it's the right thing too, the right choice. At the moment death is the easy choice, carrying on is the right one."

Ethan sighed. "You really believe that?"

Harry didn't answer straight away. "Voldemort has taken away almost everything and everyone I hold dear. But I didn't give up. I look back on some of the bad times now and I wonder how the hell I managed to still be here. It was because I made the right choices, not the easy ones."

"You're getting too damn philosophical on me, Harry," Rafe mumbled, rubbing the bruise that was now forming on his jaw where Harry had hit him. "But I see your point." Harry nodded slowly and then pulled his cloak closer around himself as a cool breeze blew through the alley. "It is just hard to carry on after it all...."

Harry stared hard at Ethan. "I carry on because I owe it to every name on this wall; to everyone who puts their hope in me. I didn't choose to be the goddamn hero... I didn't choose it. But I got it, and I'm stuck with it. So I might as well do my best, save as many as I can before the end."

"You do sound like the hero..."

Harry laughed mirthlessly. "I never feel like it. Just feel like a kid who skipped his entire childhood and ended up as a key figure in a war where there can be no victory without death."

"But you are powerful. Maybe even enough to challenge *him*?"

"No... My power is a poor insult in the shadow of Voldemort's. But I'm getting there," he said fiercely, and there was a fire in his eyes that no one saw because of his hood.

"You feel you have to fight him?"

Harry sighed. "I know I can't live until Voldemort is dead. And I *know* I will fight him to the death."

"You could just end up as another name on the wall...."

"A risk I'm more than willing to take," Harry said without any hesitation.

"There you go," said Rafe, "Hero talk again."

Harry laughed slightly, only slightly and then looked at his watch. It was coming up five o'clock. "We should start heading back. Don't want to miss dinner."

Ethan nodded and placed a hand on the wall. He whispered something under his breath that Harry didn't catch and then turned away. "War will kill us all!" he said roughly before Apparating away.

Harry sighed and turned once again towards the memorial wall. With one last glance at the dozens upon dozens of names, Harry pointed his wand at himself. "Apyraceus..."

"It was a really brave thing to do, Ron," said Harry at Dinner an hour and a half later. He and Ethan had just made it back from the shack in time, but it was a very close thing. "Not many would take the job, knowing what happened to the last Minister."

"Yeah... that worries me a bit. But, I still can't believe it. One day stuck in some dingy office with only the teapot for company, next day Minister of Bloody Magic."

Hermione smiled and stroked Ron's shoulder. "And he's doing a really good job already."

"Hmm..." he mumbled through some spuds, his attention devoted entirely to Hermione now.

"He will be a good Minister," said Ginny unexpectedly from Hermione's left.

"Of course he will," agreed Harry.

Ginny smiled thankfully at him, as if his opinion was worth a lot more than he thought. She spoke to him now. "And how are you, Harry. You scared the first year's half to death yesterday, especially when your scar exploded."

Harry grimaced, raising a hand to his scar as he did. "I'm fine. Nothing I can't bounce back from."

Ginny appeared thoughtful for a moment. "Seems to be nothing you can't bounce back from...."

Harry nodded slightly but didn't say anything for a moment. He glanced at Ron and Hermione. *I couldn't go on if they were gone...* His eyes finally came to rest on Ginny's again. *You too...* "I have my limits," he finally said simply.

Chapter 13 - The Good Times and Truths

Friendship is the golden thread that ties all hearts together

--Unknown

The next week at Hogwarts was one of the hardest Harry had ever had to face. Everybody was trying to take back what Voldemort had stolen, trying to reclaim the normality that was their lives, while at the same time knowing that it was lost forever. They were all changed... death did that.

Harry watched the students move from one day to the next aimlessly. Some looked lost, others scared, and some just gone. He saw the young girl who lost her parents once or twice and both times she seemed to be somewhere else, showing no emotion, not caring where she went next. Seamus was putting on a brave face to the crowds after the loss of his uncle, but Harry could tell he was just as scared as everyone else, more so because the blow had hit close to home for him.

There were others as well. It hadn't just been Gryffindor that had suffered. Students from each house had lost someone, even Slytherin. It was so quiet of a day in the school, that Harry found it hard to believe that over one thousand people resided in the castle. Harry thought that for some unknown reason, Ethan was affected the worst by the attack.

He had taken to sitting alone all the time, and speaking only when spoken too. It was as if he held himself responsible for the massacre. Why should he...?

But as it has a way of doing, life went on. Everyone still attended their lessons, still carried on, and most were looking forward to the Christmas Hogsmeade weekend as a chance to relax a little, a chance to forget their problems; if only for a couple of hours.

As far as Harry was concerned, he was looking forward to Christmas. He still wasn't sure where he was going to spend it but it would probably be the Burrow. He hoped so anyway. Hogwarts was all right, but he felt as if the castle was suffocating him, he had to get out and spend some time away. The atmosphere inside the castle was too thick.

It wasn't until Thursday morning, that Harry found out he wouldn't be spending Christmas at Hogwarts, but he wouldn't be spending it at the Burrow with the Weasleys either. He had just sat down next to Ron, who was halfway through his breakfast. Harry was one of the last in the hall as he had slept in a little bit that morning. After pouring himself some orange juice, and buttering some toast, the post owls descended upon the hall.

Since the attack, there were a lot more owls coming in everyday. Some with notes from concerned parents, asking their child if everything was okay. Some were subscriptions to the *Prophet*, there were a lot more now the war had accelerated quite a bit. And this was on top of the normal amount of mail.

Harry looked up absently at the owls. He didn't expect any mail, so he wasn't disappointed when he didn't see the snowy white of Hedwig's feathers mixed among the mass of brown owls.

Two owls did land on the table in front of him, but they were after Hermione. One of them was a *Prophet* bird, the other was a Hogwart's owl with a letter tied to its leg. Harry returned to his toast as the prophet bird took flight, a Knut in its pouch.

He looked up again quickly as Hermione squealed with what Harry supposed was excitement. "What is it?" asked Ron quickly from Harry's

left.

"I'm going home for Christmas," she said happily. "I didn't last year because of... well everything, and I really love Christmas at home."

"Oh... well, that's great, Hermione," said Ron a little gloomily.

Hermione noticed. "What's the matter?"

"Well I was hoping you would spend Christmas with us..."

She smiled. "That's just it, though. My parents have invited you and Harry as well." Harry looked up at this and Ron looked confused. "They really do want to meet you two," continued Hermione eagerly. "It's only ever been a brief 'hello' in Diagon Alley or somewhere and they'd like to get to know you better. Please say you'll come..." she ended anxiously.

"Well... I...?" mumbled Ron.

"Of course we'll come," said Harry. "Why wouldn't we?" Ron nodded.

Hermione sighed and looked relieved. "Thanks," she said. "Oh it's going to be so good. I've not had many Christmas' at home since I've been at Hogwarts. And now you two will be there as well."

Hermione could barely suppress her excitement and Harry smiled slightly. He was off to the Grangers for Christmas, it would be fun he thought. One *dark* thought did pierce his mind though. How well protected was Hermione's house? Would his going make the home a target? What magic protected the place? Deciding he'd ask Dumbledore later, Harry returned to his breakfast. The term didn't officially end to Sunday the 23rd, so there was plenty of time.

"I'm going to go Owl them back now," said Hermione. "Come on, Ron. If we hurry we can get there before first period."

"But I want to finish my-" Ron stopped talking when he saw the eager look on Hermione's face. She really wanted to go. "All right," he sighed.

Harry laughed as Ron was dragged away from his bacon and eggs. After they left, he moved down the table some so he was sitting next to Ethan.

"What are your plans for Christmas, Ethan?" he asked.

Rafe turned to look at Harry and spoke slowly and coldly when he did. "Going to go see someone...."

"You're spending Christmas with them?"

Ethan nodded but didn't say anything else. He briefly looked at Harry for a moment before standing up and walking away, out of the hall. Harry frowned and contemplated going after him, but decided against it, Ethan could handle himself. He spent the last quarter of an hour at breakfast talking to Ginny before the bell went that signalled the beginning of the day.

Harry said his goodbyes and set off for Defence Against the Dark Arts. He arrived just as the second bell went and slipped in at the end of the line. When he entered, he saw Ron and Hermione sitting three desks across to the right. Harry made his way through and sat down next to Hermione.

"You get the owl off?" he asked.

She nodded. "Yes. My parents are going to be so happy. They've wanted to really meet you for so long, but that hasn't always been possible..." Hermione looked at Harry sadly. "You know... something has always got in the way..."

Harry nodded but didn't want to upset Hermione while she was in such a good mood. She had been really down this week, after the attack. Who hadn't...? "I'm looking forward to meeting them as well," he said happily.

Hermione beamed. "So is Ron. My dad especially wants to meet Ron because he's, you know, *with* me."

Harry laughed and looked over Hermione's shoulder. Ron had a very worried look plastered all over his face. Hermione turned and noticed it as well. "Don't worry, Ron. I'm sure he'll like you."

Yeah," laughed Harry. "Son of the Minister of Magic and all." Harry continued to laugh and Ron glared at him.

"Don't call me that," he mumbled. "Doesn't sound right..."

Harry continued to laugh and shake his head as Moody entered the room. Mr. Weasley was doing a good job as Minister, though. France had agreed to train more Aurors, as they were next in line if Britain fell to Voldemort. There was only a thin stretch of sea separating the two countries. And now the Order had the full Ministry resources at their fingertips. Things were still dark, but there was a small speck of light that was growing. It gave people hope in wake of the Diagon Alley massacre.

"Right," barked Moody. "Good morning." Without waiting for a reply he carried on. "Now today things are going to be a little different." Moody smiled malevolently and every person in the class sat up a little straighter. "Now that you've all duelled against one another, I'm going to show you today how it's really done..."

The assembled students looked between themselves nervously as Moody continued to smile. No one looked more nervous than Neville, though. *What did he mean* thought Harry, but in some deep corner of his mind, Harry realised exactly what he meant.

"POTTER," Moody shouted and Harry jumped slightly in spite of himself. "You're the top duellist in the class. Therefore, you get to duel me. Come on; let's show this lot how it's done."

Every head in the room turned towards Harry. Every head that is, except Ethan's, who stared quietly at a spot on his desk. Harry saw that Malfoy looked extremely happy about this. He thought Harry would lose... painfully.

Harry sighed and rose from his seat and walked out into the middle of the room, where Moody was waiting. "I want you to watch the techniques used carefully," said Moody to the rest of the room. "Make notes on our strengths and weaknesses."

There was a moment given while people scurried to get out a quill and parchment. Harry and Moody used this time to get into position. Once everyone was ready, Harry and Moody bowed to each other and moved five paces back.

Harry's mind was racing a mile a minute. *I can't possibly win this* he thought *Moody's a highly experienced Auror....* But the other voice in his head stated logic as well. *You do have exceptional duelling skills....* They faced one another down and Harry slowly raised his wand. At exactly the same moment, the tension in the room huge, Harry and Moody fired identical curses.

"STUPEFY!" they both yelled and then both stepped to the right to avoid the curses. It was like symmetry.

But Harry didn't have long to think about it before Moody was on the offensive again. With speed that surprised everyone, he raised his wand with a quick flick of his wrist and fired the Impediment Jinx. "Impedimenta!" The hot light shot forth from Moody's wand and crackled like lightning through the air.

Harry saw it coming and instinctively fell back, he landed hard on the floor. He had a brief glimpse of several people around the room scribbling notes down furiously before he rolled to his left and quickly jumped to his feet. As he rose, he shot a curse from under his arm. "Stupefy."

Again Moody side stepped it and retaliated just as fast, bringing Harry back down to the floor. *He's so damn fast* thought Harry, picking himself up off the floor, just in time to receive the disarming charm in the face. Harry somersaulted backwards with the force of the curse and his wand was ripped out of his grasp. For the third time in as many minutes Harry landed hard on his back. But enough was enough.

Quicker than anyone in the room had expected, even Moody, Harry was on his feet again. "Accio Wand!" he shouted as Moody hastily tried to pocket his wand. Not quick enough. Harry's wand came sailing back through the air to him and he caught it with a twirl and a flick. He and Moody were now on opposite sides of the room, wands pointed at each other.

"I hope everyone's paying attention," barked Moody to the room, both his good and magically eye never leaving Harry.

But he didn't have to worry about that. All sixty or so people in the room

were enthralled with the progress of the duel. It carried on for another ten minutes, curses ripping through the air, back and forth. Most people had given up trying to write down technique, they didn't want to miss a thing.

Harry was tiring, Moody threw curse after curse after him. He was on the defensive now, not enough time to get one of his own in. Harry began to get frustrated at the seemingly endless barrage of curses. His frustration built as Moody showed no sign of tiring.

Sidestepping a Stupefy, Harry raised his wand and his hand. "IMPEDIMENTA!" he cried. Two equal jets of light sprung from his wand and his hand.

Moody stepped back and braced himself as the first one rocketed into the Protego shield charm he'd raised early. The shield buckled under the curse but didn't break. It happened when the second one hit. Moody's shield was obliterated, it shattered into a thousand bright blue sparks and the old Auror staggered back.

Harry saw his chance, and didn't waste it. "Stupefy!" He was sure this one would connect; sure he'd won the duel. But Moody was very, very fast. He leapt out of the way at the last second and the red beam missed him by a quarter of an inch.

From the ground, he shot a disarming charm at Harry. He dodged it easily but that was all the time Moody needed to get up. They were both heavily panting now, exhausted from the vast amount of spell work. That was until; Harry felt one of the strangest things he had ever felt in his life.

He forgot about the duel as he felt a breeze blow around him and *through* him. No one else seemed to have noticed it, or even could notice it. It seemed to be covering him from head to toe, inside and out. It felt warm, safe, and secure. A thousand feelings in one and Harry felt them all. It wasn't until he saw the faint crackles of lightning on his skin that he realised what was happening. His magic, the pure magic, *the power the Dark lord knows not*, was doing this.

Harry was so distracted by it he didn't notice Moody raise his wand. But the magic wasn't like last time, it wasn't going to burst out of him and destroy everything close. Harry didn't know how he knew this, but he just

did. He heard phoenix song, he could tell know one else did. This was his, it was for him. The feeling left as quickly as it had come, though. But Harry felt very powerful when it did. There was still the faint crackle of lightning across his skin, he hoped no one noticed. It wasn't until this point that Harry finally looked up across the room and saw the light of a curse heading straight towards him.

It was too close to dodge, too close to defend against. Too close to do anything but stand and take it. Harry closed his eyes and braced himself as Moody's stunning spell flew through the air. He had expected it to hit as soon as his eyes were closed... but it didn't. He opened his eyes now and saw what appeared to be a blue shield in front of him.

The blue curtain was hazy and Harry could see the shocked faces of Moody and several of his classmates through it. There was also a red spot where the stunning spell had hit, directly in front of him. But as he watched it, it faded, leaving the shield intact. The blue haze also disappeared but Harry could feel it was still there, ready to protect him against another curse. But none were forthcoming from Moody.

Now this was no Protego charm. Harry knew he hadn't cast one, nor even thought of casting one. It was stronger than a Protego charm as well, a lot stronger. It hadn't even cracked under the stunning spell. Harry had a thought; *it couldn't be anything else...? My magic is protecting me... it has to be.*

It was now that Harry really remembered that he was supposed to be duelling. In an instant, he raised his wand and pointed it at Moody. But it was over.

"Nice duel, Potter," he barked, but gave Harry a piercing glare with his good eye. "Didn't even see you cast that shield?"

Harry didn't say anything. He just nodded and pocketed his wand as he walked back over to his seat next to Hermione. Moody had already begun lecturing the class and asking quick fire questions on the duel, when he finally sat down. He sighed heavily and rubbed his hand through his hair before turning to look at Hermione. She looked worried.

"What?" he asked.

"You didn't cast a shield charm? Did you, Harry?"

Harry slowly shook his head. "No..." He could still feel the power of the shield around him. It was still there, ready to stop a curse. Normal shield charms didn't move when the caster did, this was so different.

"What do you think it is...?"

Harry had a fairly good idea what it was, but he would have to tell her about the prophecy if he shared it. That would just raise too many questions, and he wasn't ready to do that... "I'm not sure... but it can't be bad if it protects me?"

Hermione nodded but still looked slightly unnerved. "Be careful, Harry..." she said. Harry didn't say anything.

Harry was, as usual, up early Saturday morning. He stared sleepily at the drapes that surrounded his bed and listened to the howling wind outside. Through the gap in the curtains he saw the slow fall of fresh snow. Harry rolled over and sighed as he dangled his legs off the side of the bed. Today was Hogsmeade day, Christmas shopping day. He supposed he was looking forward to it slightly.

After showering and shaving, Harry made his way down into the common room. He was the only one there. Most people slept in Saturday, and today was no different. He sat in his armchair perusing over all the possibilities of Christmas presents. *Ron will want something Quidditch...?* he thought *And Hermione something educational...?*

Harry was brought out of his thoughts as a small sharp stab of pain shot through his scar. His hand instinctively jumped to his forehead and Harry sighed heavily. Voldemort was happy, dangerously so, which meant someone was suffering...

Harry sighed again and mentally added it to his list of reasons to kill Voldemort. Since the Diagon Alley attack, Harry had been trying to decipher the emotions that he received from Voldemort. It wasn't very often that he did, but after Diagon Alley, and how he had felt unexplainably happy about looking at the Prophet article on Fudge's visit, Harry tried to put it together, to figure out his plans before they happened.

He wasn't having much luck.

The fact Voldemort hadn't been seen since the attack, nor any of his Death Eater's, left Harry with even more worry. He had shown the world he had existed and then completely disappeared, leaving nothing but destruction in his wake. Harry could only feel that he was toying with the country, playing with it until the moment he decided to take it for his own. But he was sure Voldemort didn't have enough Death Eaters for that... did he?

His thoughts stayed with him for most of that early morning, and only let up when the common room started to get a little fuller. Ron came down the stairs and Harry called him over.

"Morning, Ron." Ron mumbled something incoherently and sat down with a yawn. "Looking forward to Hogsmeade today?"

Ron seemed to wake up a bit at this. "Yeah... Yeah," he said. "First time Hermione and I have a proper chance at going out."

"How are things going with her?" asked Harry gently.

Ron smiled slightly. "It's been like a dream... thanks, Harry."

Harry laughed but his brow furrowed in confusion. "What did I do?"

"If you hadn't lapsed into a coma and broken your spine at the awards ceremony, she and I may never have got together."

"Oh... glad I could help?" shrugged Harry.

Ron nodded. "So, Hogsmeade. What am I going to do...?" He seemed anxious.

"What do you mean, 'what are you going to do?'"

"I mean, where am I going to take Hermione? What do you do in Hogsmeade?"

Harry laughed. And then put on what he thought was the voice of an expert. "Well, Ronald," he began as Ron cringed. "Hogsmeade holds many possibilities for two young people such as yourselves. May I

suggest Madam Puddifoot's?"

"No you may not!" said Ron quickly.

"Then how about the Three Broomsticks?"

Ron sighed and then quickly changed the subject. "What do you want for Christmas?"

Harry smiled. "Don't know? You pretty much got me the perfect present for my birthday?" he said, pulling out the long forgotten pocket watch that had sat around his neck for the past two months.

Ron nodded. "Hermione will know what to get you. Oh! Just so you know, the Chudley Cannons have a new player book out this year. Just thought you'd like to know," he added innocently.

Harry laughed as Ron rose from his seat and set off towards the stairs. He continued to sit by the fire for another thirty minutes as people came and went. Eventually Hermione came down the stairs and moved to the armchair next to Harry and sat down. "Morning," he said.

"Good morning," she replied briskly and with a smile.

"You're in a cheerful mood?"

Hermione smiled again. "Today is going to be good day."

"You think so?"

"I know so!"

"Do we want to go down to the hall?" asked Ron, who had just returned.

Harry and Hermione nodded and stood. She grasped Ron's hand and the three of them set off towards the Great Hall, for breakfast. The corridors were alive with Hogsmeade weekend excitement. When they reached the entrance hall, it had just gone nine o'clock so Filch was not letting people leave for the village.

Harry avoided the entrance and followed Ron and Hermione into the Great Hall. The tables were, as usual, lined with food and students. All the staff was visible at the high table and Harry caught Dumbledore's

eye as he sat down and nodded slightly. *I'll talk to him tonight about Christmas* he thought as he sat down.

The three of them talked amongst themselves for a few minutes before they were greeted by a familiar face. "Hello, Ginny," said Harry as she sat down across the table from him.

"Hi," she smiled.

Ginny was wearing thick robes, a scarf, gloves and a beanie. It was obvious to Harry she was off to Hogsmeade today. Harry asked her anyway for conversations sake. "You going to Hogsmeade?"

"Of course," she replied, taking some toast from the rack. "Christmas shopping is always fun."

"Would you like to come with us?" asked Hermione quickly, and before Harry could say anything else.

Ginny shrugged but Harry could tell she was a happy. "Okay, but hang on a minute. I've just got to tell my friends I've got other plans now." Ginny stood up, taking her toast with her and disappeared down the line of the wooden table. It wasn't until Harry, Ron, and Hermione stood and made ready to go that she came back, smiling warmly at Harry. "Are we ready?"

Filch let them past silently and it wasn't long before the four of them found themselves on the old road down to Hogsmeade. The sun was out and shining brightly today, but it was still cold. The snow on the ground was several inches thick, and some of it had turned to slush, which made walking especially cold on the toes.

On the way down, Hermione seemed to keep an endless stream of talk up about the coming Christmas, she was really excited. Ron listened adamantly, but Harry only half listened. It was one of those times of the day where his thoughts shut out the outside world, leaving him with nothing but the prophecy... and Voldemort. His eyes glazed over as he walked, his cloak pulled tightly around him, and soon he heard nothing but that high pitched laughter.

It wasn't until there was a gentle tap on his shoulder that he blinked and

immediately snapped out of his memories. Harry jumped slightly and instinctively raised his hand in defence. He lowered it an instant later, though, when he saw Ginny standing to his right. "You made me jump," he said, lowering his hand. As Harry did it struck him that his first choice was to raise his hand, not go for his wand. He nodded his head with understanding and turned back to Ginny.

"Sorry," she apologised.

Harry shrugged. "Don't worry about it. What did you want?"

Ginny smiled. "You fell behind. I came back to get you. Hermione didn't notice because she and Ron were... well, all over each other! and I thought it best I made myself scarce." She smiled again and pointed to the two entwined figures of Ron and Hermione up ahead on the snow covered road, just about to turn into the village. "What kept you?"

Harry sighed. "Just thinking about stuff...." he said and smiled sadly. "What do you say we go shopping?" he asked, trying to sound cheerful.

Ginny smiled honestly and the two of them set off down the road again. They past a few other Hogwart's students on the way through, and it wasn't long before they came to the wizarding village of Hogsmeade. Their first sight was of the High street. Snow covered the little thatched cottages and shops, hanging from the eaves and boughs of trees. It made the place look like what it was, magical.

Harry also noticed how busy the village was. He had never seen Hogsmeade as full as it was now, and it wasn't just Hogwarts students. There were grown witches and wizards in abundance, moving from shop to shop. There were small children being dragged across the street by their parents. Hogsmeade was full.

Harry watched with a bemused expression as he and Ginny walked down the street towards Weasley's Wizard Wheezes. There were so many people. It didn't make sense. Ginny had noticed it as well and she appeared just as confused as Harry. "What do you think is going on?" she asked.

Harry was silent for a moment before realisation came crashing down

upon him. He sighed. "No one wants to go to Diagon Alley?" he said quietly, the memories of the massacre surfacing. "They're too scared?"

Ginny also sighed when she understood. "Who can blame them?"

They passed a group of small children who were staring into the window of the Quidditch store, looking on at a Firebolt, while their parents chatted gloomily to one another, casting nervous glances at passers by. It was as if they feared attack from anyone at anytime... again, who could blame them?

Harry entered the brightly coloured Weasley Wizard Wheezes and followed Ginny towards the service desk. The store was just like the streets outside, busy. There were more adults than Hogwarts students perusing the products throughout the shop. And Harry had to squeeze through the crowds to make it up to the desk, where he found Fred... or was it George?

"George," said Ginny happily as they drew level with him. George made no move to correct her, so Harry assumed it was the right twin. How Ginny could tell Harry would never know?

"Hiya, Gin," he replied handing some old wizard his change. "You too, Harry," he ended with a nod above the noise in the shop, which was close to deafening.

"Busy...?" asked Ginny innocently. George glared at her and Harry laughed.

"Yeah, so leave me alone!"

Ginny ignored him. "You the only one here?"

"Thank you, come again. Eh? Sorry, Ginny?"

She sighed. "Is Fred around?"

George laughed sarcastically. "Fred? No. *He* 'just nipped out' to bloody London!"

Harry and Ginny laughed as George cycled through three more customers. It was clear that fun loving George was at the end of his rope,

which was about to snap if somebody didn't step in. The seemingly endless line of customers had him at wit's end, and it was only ten in the morning.

Ginny was still laughing as George turned back to them. "Right, we'll just leave you to it then..."

George smiled that smile he always smiled when someone was about to turn into a six foot canary. "Ohhh no you don't. Ginny, you're a Weasley! Get behind this counter and help me out. Harry, you're as good as, you help to."

Ginny opened her mouth to protest but Harry had just seen that the line of customers was threatening to burst out of the door and onto the street, so he spoke up first. "Come on, Ginny. We can help." She looked at him for a moment before nodding slightly and moving around the back of the counter. Harry followed her.

"Good," sighed George, clearly relieved. "Bags are here and money goes there. Smile and thank the customers and we're good."

So it was for the next hour that Harry and Ginny helped George behind the counter. It was still hard to keep up with the number of customers but between the three of them they managed. Harry found himself doing some very quick thinking when it came to giving out change, maths had never been one of his strong points but he got there in the end.

Some of the customers recognised him as their eyes did the flick up to his forehead and they took in the scar. Harry tried to pretend he didn't notice, but that wasn't possible when one young witch asked excitedly if she could shake his hand. Harry obliged and she moved away looking awestruck. This happened several times before Fred returned.

"Hello, Brother," he said lazily and care free, leaning against the counter. "Good business today."

George stood with his mouth open for a second. "Good business?" he whispered. "Do you have any idea how many customers we've had through? More so when word spread that Harry was here!"

"So he is. Hello, Harry," said Fred. "And Ginny too. Doesn't look like

you're short of help?"

George sighed and muttered a few choice words under his breath. "I think it best we make a quick exit," whispered Ginny. "Fred's for it."

Harry tried to stifle his laughter as he and Ginny moved away, while George slapped his twin brother upside his head and pulled him around the counter. It was at this moment, that Harry managed to get out of the door.

"Do you think Fred will be all right?" Harry asked once they started walking again.

Ginny smiled. "It'll be fine. George could never hold a grudge for longer than an hour."

Harry nodded and then checked his watch. It was eleven thirty. "Where to now then?"

Ginny's brow furrowed in thought. "Well we've still not done any Christmas shopping. Should we head up to the Quidditch store and have a look there?"

"Hmm... Ron was after the new Cannon's book," he agreed thoughtfully.

A few minutes later Harry and Ginny entered Quality Quidditch Supplies. It wasn't as heavily packed as Weasley's Wizard Wheezes, but it wasn't empty either. Harry found himself just wanting to get the book and get out. Of course that didn't happen.

He and Ginny squeezed through the crowds and over to the racks of Quidditch paraphernalia against the far back wall of the shop. As they walked, a small golden snitch flittered across the ceiling and just above their heads. Many people watched it attentively and a few tried to grasp it as it past over them. When it came close, Harry instinctively reached out and plucked it out of the air, catching it deftly with the tips of his fingers, it almost got away.

"Nice catch," said Ginny.

Harry smiled. "Thanks."

"Oh! You caught the snitch!"

Harry turned and looked at the person who had spoken. It was a young witch; she had wavy shoulder length brown hair and couldn't have been more than five foot two. She also had an employee badge pinned to her blue robes. "You caught the snitch!"

"Er- Yeah," said Harry. "I did...."

"Congratulations. It's yours now," she nodded to a small promotional poster taped to one of the wooden support poles. It read:

CATCH THE SNITCH!

Nab the escaped golden snitch!

The person, that is he or she, who catches the loose Snitch, may keep it. As part of our promotional publicity program, one golden snitch will be released every week for six weeks. Are you a Seeker?

The poster went on to explain the finer points of the promotion but Harry got the gist of it; he turned back to the sales assistant. "So I can keep this then?" He held up the now still snitch that had reverted to its collapsed form, wings were in.

She nodded and there was some scattered clapping from those in the store who had noticed his catch. Harry smiled to the crowd and saw recognition dawn on a few of their faces as they noticed his scar. He shook his head slightly and put the snitch in his pocket. It was at this moment that he remembered what he had seen in Snape's pensieve. His father had also owned a snitch.

"Well done," smiled Ginny. The two of them continued on towards the book racks on the back wall.

It took Harry ten minutes to find the new Chudley Cannons player book. He waited a few more minutes while Ginny perused the various titles. When she had finished, they walked over to the counter and paid for their books. They were served by the same assistant they met earlier, she congratulated Harry again and then said goodbye.

Harry and Ginny emerged back onto the busy street just as the sun went behind the grey storm clouds, casting a dark shadow on everything. It was at this time Harry realised just how hungry he was and just how busy the morning had been. "Should we go get something to eat?" he asked Ginny.

She nodded and pulled her scarf closer around her neck. It was getting a little chilly. "Three Broomsticks?"

They crossed the slush covered street and passed through the large, noisy crowds and soon enough came to the small inn. They entered. The Three Broomsticks wasn't as busy as Harry had expected it to be; he spotted a spare table instantly and made a line for it. The pub was almost full with Hogwarts students and, of course, local residents, though, so Harry found it remarkably lucky that they had managed to secure a table.

He waited until Ginny was seated before moving. Once she was down he asked her what she wanted for lunch and told her to wait at the table so they didn't lose it. Harry went over to the bar and ordered two mugs of butterbeer, and two plates of sandwiches and fruit. Five minutes later he was re-seated at the table talking to Ginny.

"I'm not sure when we'll see dad," she said gloomily. "He wasn't even sure he could get *Christmas Day off*! Says things are just too fragile at the Ministry right now."

"I'm sure he wouldn't spend Christmas there," replied Harry truthfully. Mr. Weasley just didn't seem the type to.

Ginny nodded and thoughtfully chewed on her sandwich. It was at this moment that Harry suddenly jerked his head back as his scar quickly and viciously burned. "You okay, Harry?" she asked quickly and suddenly, her voice full of concern.

Harry sighed and breathed in heavily. "Yeah..." He coughed to clear his throat. "Yes. It was nothing, happens all the time."

Ginny lowered her voice to practically a whisper. "Did you see *him*?"

"Not *him* personally, but I saw what he was seeing. He was somewhere

with... grass and stone..." Ginny didn't say anything. "I suppose that narrowed it down to practically anywhere in the country," he ended sarcastically.

Ginny smiled nervously at his attempt at humour, but then lost all expression. "I have no idea how you deal with him all the time, Harry?" she whispered quietly.

"You get used to it eventually... it just became part of my life." Harry stated simply, taking a sip of his butterbeer.

Ginny fell silent and idly scratched a spot on the wooden table in front of her. It was a long moment before she spoke. "I still have nightmares about him..." Harry was now silent. "Riddle I mean. From... from the diary...?"

Harry clenched his jaw in anger. *Riddle...* Not knowing quite what to say, he just went for the obvious. "He's gone, Ginny. The diary is gone. He won't be back."

She looked up into his eyes for a moment and then looked down again, smiling sadly. "I know... but that doesn't make it any less real...."

Harry sighed and swirled the last dregs of his butterbeer around in his mug. "No, no I suppose it doesn't."

"I just have all these thoughts that get mixed up and at the end he's there, smiling at me like he used to...."

Harry was concerned. "Have you talked to anyone about this?"

"Just you now. I thought if anyone would understand it would be you."

Harry nodded. "Voldemort's-" She twitched slightly. "Voldemort's always, and I mean always, in my head. I can't escape it. I see his thoughts, I feel his emotions, and sometimes I see things as he does...." Ginny opened her mouth to speak but Harry stopped her. "I know that that's not quite the same thing you feel but when it gets too much, I... well I make a list in my head of all the things that he is, and all the things that I am. I separate myself from him, find the differences."

"Harry..."

Harry didn't say anything for a moment while he thought about the immense connection that he shared with the Dark Lord. "There are so many things that I have in common with him, Ginny. Sometimes... sometimes it's so hard to tell where I end and he begins. But there are differences, major differences, and those are the ones that count."

Ginny sighed happily. "Thank you, Harry. It's nice to know I'm not alone...."

"Me too," he said, reaching out and squeezing her hand affectionately on the table. He removed it a moment later and sipped on the butterbeer.

An uneasy silence past over their table, and Harry absently rubbed at his scar as another topic of conversation was searched for. He looked around the bar, his eyes darting to and fro from one person to the next. Kids, teenagers, adults... it didn't matter; they were all caught up in the same war.

"I was thinking of trying to get more people in the DA club," said Harry off the top of his head. He hadn't really been thinking that much about it, but the silence was very uncomfortable.

"Oh? Well, that's good...."

They talked sparingly over the next ten minutes over the progress of the club. Most of its members were competent in dozens of hexes and charms. And, Harry was very proud of this, half of them could produce a corporeal patronus. Ginny's was a surprise to most, when it turned out to be a phoenix that beared more than a slight resemblance to Fawkes.

After the finished their lunch, Harry went and ordered two more butterbeers from the bar. When he returned, he saw that Ron and Hermione had arrived, and had pulled some chairs over to their table. He got there just as Ron was standing to go get him and Hermione a butterbeer. Ron punched his arm playfully as he passed, which caused some of the butterbeer in the mugs to slip down the front of his robes.

Harry sat down and passed one of the steaming mugs to Ginny before performing a small cleaning charm with his hand, this wasn't lost on

Ginny. "Why didn't you use a wand, Harry?"

"Hmm? Oh! I -er- it's just sometimes easier to use wandless magic."

"Not for all of us," said Hermione. "I've only just learnt how to do Banishment charms without a wand, and Harry could do that the first time he tried two months ago!"

Ginny looked impressed. And Harry found himself feeling very self conscious. He was saved a moment later though when Ron returned with butterbeers. "So what have you two been up to today?" he asked taking a seat.

Ginny and Harry both shrugged. "Not much," began Harry. "Helped George out at the shop."

"And we went to the Quidditch store and Harry won a snitch!"

Ron looked over to Harry. "You caught that? I tried, thought it would make a good Christmas present."

"You missed it by a mile, though," said Hermione shaking her head with laughter.

Ron feigned offence. "I tried my best," he moped. Hermione fell for it and wrapped her arms around him in apology. Harry caught Ron's sly grin from over her shoulder and chuckled. Ginny rolled her eyes.

"Well, should we carry on shopping, Ginny?" asked Harry when Ron and Hermione's lunch arrived. Ginny nodded and then they said their goodbyes to Ron and Hermione, finished their butterbeers and headed towards the door.

Soon they were back out on the busy, blustery street. The first thing Harry saw were two familiar people walking towards them through the mass of black Hogwarts robes. "Hello, Neville, Luna," said Harry when they drew level to each other.

"Afternoon, Harry," said a very confident sounding Neville Longbottom.

"Good day," Luna said dreamily.

"How's your day been?" asked Ginny.

Neville nodded thoughtfully for a moment. "We only just got here actually. Me and Luna spent the morning trimming some of the plants in greenhouse three."

Harry and Ginny nodded and then turned to Luna. "What have you got planned now then?"

"Well, Neville and I were on our way to Madam Puddifoot's. Weren't we, Neville?"

Harry looked back at Neville, who now looked understandably nervous. "Neville," began Harry, "are you and Lu-"

"We have to go," said Ginny quickly, grabbing Harry by the arm and pulling him away down the street.

"Ow! Gin- What?"

"Let's just leave them be, Harry," she said smiling and then shook her head. "Neville and Luna... who'd a thought?"

The storm clouds were heavy in the sky as Harry and Ginny crossed the busy street. It would snow later on, that much was sure. After dodging the crowds and passing Honeydukes, he and Ginny entered the Hogsmeade branch of Flourish and Blott's bookstore.

Harry's main concern right now was getting Hermione a book for Christmas, and getting back to the castle before the snow hit. He and Ginny separated at the entrance, both heading towards different sections of the store.

Now the thing about magic that still struck Harry at times, was its ability to make a building bigger on the inside than it was on the outside. Harry was soon deep in the stacks of the advanced texts and tomes; he had lost sight of the entrance and Ginny.

He quickly scanned book after endless book, looking for something that Hermione might find interesting. The problem with that was that Hermione would find them all interesting. He passed by all the Goblin

material and had just entered the Muggle section when something caught his eye. It was perched precariously on a shelf just below his waist and he picked it up quickly.

On the front were two words, *Everlasting Thoughts*. This title confused Harry and he opened the book up to a random page, it was empty. He flicked through another few pages. They were all blank. It wasn't very thick, but Harry could tell it was enchanted to never run out of pages. He flicked endlessly through parchment after parchment. Harry closed the book and looked it up and down. The cover was black and bound in leather with a gold trim for a border. The pages inside, though blank, were of a very high quality parchment. Apparently, the only words in the entire book were the title; *Everlasting Thoughts*, which was in gold script across the top.

Harry was just about to put it back when he saw an identical copy of the book on the shelf, and next to that were a selection of Muggle Diaries and writing pads. It struck Harry that what he was holding, was a simple journal. He nodded with understanding and was again just about to put it back on the shelf when an idea came to him. He kept the book and moved on, back to looking for Hermione.

It didn't take him much longer to find a present for Hermione. Just out of the Muggle section was the Advanced Studies section. He found her a book that was way beyond NEWT level magic, and therefore perfect for Hermione, who in Harry's opinion, could pass the NEWTs now if she tried.

Harry walked back towards the entrance, both books in hand, and was soon paying for them at the front desk. "Six galleons, dear," said the elderly witch from behind the counter. Harry rooted around in his pocket and felt his hand brush against the snitch in there before he reached his money bag. As he had magically enhanced his pockets as Ethan had showed him, there was a lot in them. "Thank you. Would you like those gift wrapped for Christmas, dear?"

"Please," said Harry and the elderly witch pulled out her wand. She muttered a small spell and wrapping and tape shot out of her wand and covered each book. "Thanks," he said, picking up his now wrapped

purchases and placing them in the bag with Ron's present. Harry asked the lady if Ginny had been by yet, she hadn't. So he moved over to a chair by the window and sat down heavily, it had been a long day.

As he waited, Harry pulled out the small golden snitch and let it flutter about in his hand for a moment. It hovered a few feet in the air and then made a dash for it, as quick as a flash Harry caught it and the cycle started all over again. He smiled as he did this, remembering his father. He didn't have to wait long for Ginny, she returned five minutes later carrying several books that looked way to heavy.

Harry jumped up to help her but she made it to the counter all right. After paying for the books, he and Ginny exited the store. It was cold outside, the weather was definitely about to burst. "Should we get back to the castle now?" he asked Ginny who had just pulled her beanie over her ears.

"Uh-huh ," she nodded.

They began walking but Ginny was weighed down with the heavy bags of books. Harry took two off her and they continued with a little more speed. He looked at his watch as they exited the small village; it had just gone three thirty. Thunder rolled overhead and it seemed most Hogwarts students had got the message and were on the way back to the castle.

Ginny's fifth year friends were just up ahead and they turned to wait for her when she called to them. Harry and Ginny jogged a little to catch up. Although it was unnecessary, as practically every magical person in the world knew who Harry was; Ginny introduced him to her friends. "That's Ellen and Marie," Harry said hello and they shyly acknowledged him. "And that's Janet and Amy."

Harry knew them by face from seeing them around the school and common room, but now he had names to put to the faces. They walked quickly up the road and turned the corner onto the homestretch back to the castle. The group had just crossed into the Hogwarts grounds when the storm broke. It started with a giant rip of lightning across the sky and then small hailstones began to fall with large drops of rain.

All students still on the path had to make a mad dash to the entrance of the castle. By the time Harry, Ginny, and her friends had made it into the entrance hall they were soaked through and had snow in their hair. After a few drying and warming charms, Harry felt a whole lot better. He cast some on Ginny and then picked up all the bags with his purchases. He and Ginny and her friends set off back to the common room as the thunder roared outside.

Once back in the common room, Harry said goodbye to Ginny and thanked her for today. It had been really good, one of the few good times he really enjoyed. She smiled and agreed and then hugged him quickly before moving away with her friends. Harry smiled as he entered the dorm and placed his purchases in his trunk. Ron's Cannons book, Hermione's study book, and the journal; *Everlasting Thoughts*.

Harry quickly changed his clothes while he was there, his robes felt to stuffy in the warmth of the castle and he opted for a shirt and jeans instead. When he returned to the common room fifteen minutes later, it was just as Ron and Hermione entered, carrying all their bags and complaining about the weather. With them came Neville, who was smiling happily, not at all bothered by the weather.

Harry passed them as they were heading upstairs to change and put away their parcels. He said he'd see them when they got back down. He moved over to one of the back tables, where he spotted Ethan. "What did you do in Hogsmeade?" asked Harry.

Rafe looked up and seemed to think about Harry's question for a moment before answering. "Didn't go," he sighed, scribbling aimlessly on a piece of parchment in front of him.

Harry frowned. "Why not?"

"Didn't want to...." he finally said, getting up and without saying another word, walking away towards the stairs that led up to the dorm.

Harry shook his head in confusion as he watched Ethan retreat; he wondered if he would ever understand him. There was something deep inside him that Harry found familiar, a secret that he may tell in time. It was something that made it hard for Harry to talk to Ethan. Whatever it

was Harry could tell that Rafe hated himself for it, and at times this would be shown more clearly in the way he acted, such as walking away just now.

When Ron and Hermione came back down the stairs ten minutes later, they did so at the same time, and soon spotted Harry playing chess with Neville near the window. The snow was coming down in torrents outside and Harry was very grateful that he wasn't out in it. Neville had just succeeded in taking his knight when Ron and Hermione moved over and sat at their table.

"All right, you two?" he asked, moving his pawn to check. "Check!"

"Fine," said Ron. "Neville, move the bishop to D-4." Neville obliged and in that one move, Harry was now the one in check.

"Ha! Check," laughed Neville. Harry glared at Ron.

"Do you know what's up with Ethan, Harry?" asked Ron.

Harry shrugged. "No? Why'd you ask?"

"Because he's up in the dorm now throwing a red ball back and forth against the wall with a blank look on his face."

"He'll be right," Harry assured Ron.

After Neville beat Harry at chess, it was Ron's turn to do so. After Ron beat Harry at chess, Neville played Ron whilst Harry chatted to Hermione a few seats over.

"I got him the new Cannons book he was after," whispered Harry. "What did you get him?"

"I got him a... no, you'll have to wait and see," she smiled.

"But-" argued Harry.

"No 'buts', Harry Potter," she said sternly but amusingly. Harry gave in.

A few hours later, everyone went down to the Great Hall for dinner. Harry, Ron, Hermione, Neville, Ginny, and her friends all walked down together. When they arrived, most of the school were already seated, as was the

staff. Harry looked up to the High table and saw Dumbledore seated there, a smile on his face as he surveyed the students before him. Harry sighed as he sat down, thinking about explaining Christmas to him this evening.

Dinner in the Hall was eventful, apart from a small twinge of pain in his scar and Ron nearly choking to death on a kipper, it was normal. Harry picked at his food and was anxious for it to be over so he could go see the headmaster.

At a quarter past seven the Hall began to empty. Harry told his friends he was going to see Dumbledore and they left him alone in his seat. He waited until Dumbledore and the other teachers left their seats and exited the hall before he got up and followed them, in the crowd of the last students in the hall.

Harry walked up to the headmaster's office slowly, to give him time to get back there before he arrived. He ambled up the staircases and past the numerous moving paintings and suits of armour. He dodged Peeves on the second floor who, as usual, was throwing bottles of ink at passers by. Some unlucky third year Ravenclaw girl caught a mouthful of ink as Harry passed.

Going slow, it took Harry twenty five minutes to reach the stone gargoyle. "Skiving Snackbox," he muttered and the gargoyle sprang to life. Harry quickly stepped onto the second step and let the stone stairs elevate him up to the office. Harry stepped off the stairs and approached the oak doors quietly; there were once again the sound of voices emanating from within.

"No, Phineas. I do not believe so" said the familiar voice of Albus Dumbledore.

"But, Albus. Remus says that the level of magic from there has been steadily increasing since July, and I don't have to remind you what happened to the Potter boy then!" That was the voice of the painting of Phineas Nigellus, an old headmaster and Sirius' great - great grandfather.

"No you don't," replied the headmaster calmly but strongly. "I'll ask you

to tell Remus to keep monitoring the situation; I want to know immediately if anything changes."

"Right," said Phineas and the voices died down.

Harry waited a few moments before knocking to make it look like he'd just arrived. "Come in," said Dumbledore from within.

Harry opened the door silently and it creaked as it swung close. "Professor Dumbledore," he said moving towards his desk.

"Good evening, Harry," replied Dumbledore. "Please have a seat."

Harry sat and his eyes flicked across the room. He saw that the portrait of Phineas was empty; presumably he was now at Grimmauld Place. Fawkes sat elegantly on his perch to the left of the desk, and, of course, the room was still littered with amazing gadgets and appliances.

"What can I do for you, Harry?"

Harry looked back at the headmaster and took a deep breath. He was a bit nervous at the prospect of what Dumbledore would say to his leaving Hogwarts. "I've -err- I've been invited to the Granger's for Christmas this year," he began, "and -er- I just wanted to see if everything was okay with that?"

Dumbledore frowned and appeared to be deep in thought. He spoke after a long moment. "You're worried about your safety and that of those around you outside of Hogwarts?"

"Yes," nodded Harry quietly.

Do you wish to go?"

Harry nodded again. "Hermione really wants me to meet her parents, and I... well I don't want to spend Christmas without her or Ron alone in the castle.

Dumbledore smiled and there was the familiar twinkle in his eye. "Very well, Harry. I see no reason why you cannot go. Provided you take proper precautions. Also, some extra protection will need to be placed around the Granger's home..." Dumbledore trailed away and fell into

thought. He jumped out of it a moment later though.

"How much protection is on their home now?" asked Harry.

Dumbledore blinked and looked at the ceiling. "Many complex wards and dark detector charms are in place over their home. They are quite safe, and, actually not a high priority target to Voldemort anyway."

"But they're still a target..." Harry said quietly.

"I'm afraid anyone associated with you may be, Harry."

Harry was silent for a moment and stared miserably at the floor. *You think I'd be used to this by now?* he thought. He straightened up a moment later though and shook his head, trying to clear it. "So I can take the train to Kings Cross with everyone else on the 23rd?"

Dumbledore nodded. "I believe that you may be in need of a good break from it all, Harry. I want you to enjoy yourself at the Granger's. Though it will probably be best if you are back at Hogwarts before the 28th."

Harry silently agreed. The castle was the safest place he could be. He felt happy now, he was going to Hermione's for Christmas, and everything promised to be good, but Harry asked his next question anyway. "Do you know what Voldemort is up to at the moment?" he asked.

Dumbledore paused before answering and Harry looked into his eyes. As he did, Harry felt a tingling sensation behind his ears and the back of his neck. When Dumbledore answered something else happened. "We, that is, the Order and the Ministry have not heard nor seen anything since the Diagon Alley attack."

The tingling increased and Harry closed his eyes and felt a surge of emotion flow through him; accompanied by a brief flash of... well he didn't know what it was? But the feeling was unmistakable. "You're lying," said Harry bluntly and quickly. Dumbledore blinked and opened his mouth slightly in surprise. Briefly Harry realised he had never seen Dumbledore surprised. "Or... you're not telling me the whole truth...?" Harry shook his head as he said this, he knew what he said was true but he didn't know how he knew?

"Harry..." began Dumbledore. "How...?"

"It's true?" asked Harry heatedly.

Dumbledore nodded slightly and Harry felt anger mingled amongst his confusion. "Can you tell me what you experienced prior to my speaking?" asked the headmaster.

Harry reached and touched the back of his neck. "I felt this tingling sensation when I looked you in the eye and then I saw... no I felt you lying. I just knew you were."

Dumbledore appeared confused, and Harry felt he didn't have a right to after just lying. "I believe, Harry. That you may have just performed Occlumency."

Harry forgot his anger for a moment. "What?"

"What you have just done, Harry. Saw into my mind without using an incantation or even without thinking the appropriate magic is the highest level of Occlumency. Very few know of it, even fewer can do it."

"What does it mean?" asked Harry roughly.

"It appears Professor Snape's Occlumency lessons had more of an effect than I thought? Or..."

"What?"

Dumbledore looked grave. "Professor Moody came and spoke to me earlier in the week. He told me of the shield charm in your duel with him..."

Harry sighed and pressed his hand across his forehead, his scar was burning. The pure magic, his magic had done it again. It had extended his occlumens ability... or so it seemed. "All right. So I can do Occlumency, so what? I want to know why you lied in the first place?"

Dumbledore was silent for a moment and then he let out a long, sad sigh. "I wished to protect you, Harry."

"Protect me? From what? It was an honest question: What is Voldemort

up to?"

"I thought it better if you didn't know the extent of his... attacks. I thought maybe you would enjoy Christmas all the more if you didn't have another weight hanging on your shoulders."

Harry frowned. "What is he doing?"

"Since the Diagon Alley attack and his failure to get a Death Eater as Minister. He has been ordering hits on the family of Ministry workers. Sadly, thirteen lives have already been claimed in his fury."

"And you thought it better I didn't know this?" said Harry dangerously.

Dumbledore nodded. "I wanted you to enjoy yourself-"

"I thought we'd got past this?" he said angrily, his voice rose as he jumped from his chair. "All the secrets, all the lies. It got Sirius killed last year..." Harry practically shouted this, all the anger, all the resentment he felt towards Dumbledore for keeping secrets was staring to seep out of him. It was a dam of anger that had started to crack, and was now leaking.

"Harry-"

"NO! You listen," cut in Harry, running a hand through his hair. "I need to know these things. It's my bloody fate to kill him; you think I'd be entitled to know a little about what's going on? But no, I get dumped with the sodding prophecy and told nothing!" Harry was seething with anger, with hate... but he didn't know who for? Voldemort... or Dumbledore?

"I apolo-"

"No. Don't," he spat. "It's just so damn unfair. I get told next to nothing for five years and then bam! Well, I'm sorry, but I've had enough. This is not some game. All the secrets, all the lies... this is real life it is reality. It's not a fairytale where the hero doesn't have to worry about the choices he makes because in the end it will be fine for him, he'll win. This-is-real! There aren't always happy endings... in fact there are *no* happy endings...."

Dumbledore seemed, for the first time ever, to be at a loss for words. It was a long uneasy moment of silence that passed between the two of them as Harry fell back into his chair, spent. "You've grown, Harry," Dumbledore finally said solemnly.

"It has to stop," Harry said desperately. "I do need to know...."

The Headmaster surveyed Harry for a moment over his half moon spectacles. "And you will," he agreed. "I suppose it is time you played a more active role in it all."

Harry stared straight into Dumbledore's eyes as he said this. There was no lie. He waited with baited breath to hear what the old man had to say next, and so did the room. All the portraits were awake and not even feigning sleep. Fawkes was perched stiffly, fire in his eyes. And the atmosphere in the room could have been cut with a knife.

"I think we should wait until after Christmas, when the new term starts. Do you agree?"

Harry sighed. "I just want to know what's going on in the world. I want to know what he's doing...."

Dumbledore nodded with understanding. "Of course. You have my word, Harry. I will no longer keep information from you." Dumbledore removed his glasses as he said this and cleaned them on his sky blue robes. "But we can discuss this more when you return from the Granger's. Also, Harry, and much more important. I think it wise to be on your guard, even now in the castle...?"

"Now?"

"I'm still at a loss as to how Miss. Patil was removed from the safety of the wards. I do think it safe to say there may be a spy at Hogwarts."

Harry nodded and decided it was time to leave, his mind instantly flicking to Malfoy as a very likely candidate for the spy. He nodded to the Headmaster and turned away without saying a word, when he reached the door, he had just placed a hand on the knob when he stopped. Without turning around, Harry took a deep breath, he spoke. "I'm sorry I shouted, Professor," he said loud enough for Dumbledore to hear.

"Do not worry, Harry. A good scream is healthy now and then. And I daresay I deserved it. Why your father and Sirius did exactly the same thing once..."

Without saying another word Harry opened the door and walked out, images of his father and Sirius shouting and raving at the Headmaster making him smile. With a heavy sigh, Harry walked back to Gryffindor tower alone, playing with the small golden snitch as he went.

The last days of term flew by relatively fast for Harry. He kept busy with a few Quidditch practices and DA meetings on top of his regular schooling and before he knew it, it was the morning of Sunday the 23rd and the Hogwarts Express was leaving in four hours at noon for London.

Harry awoke at roughly the same time as Ron on Sunday. They awoke, showered, and dressed ready for a day on the train. Harry packed all he needed into his school bag, he had discovered that the same enlargement charm he had used on his pockets, could be used on a bag. It allowed him enough room to put in several changes of clothes, his toothbrush and other essentials, such as cloaks and jumpers and some toiletries. He showed Ron how to enlarge his bag and soon enough they were down in the common room, ready to go with nothing more than a backpack to carry.

Hermione was already down in the common room talking to Ginny. It was then that Harry remembered the other thing in his bag, the journal; *Everlasting Thoughts*. He had to send it before he went or he wouldn't get another chance. He made his excuses.

"Oh! I've just remembered I have to go talk to Dumbledore," he said quickly, hoping the lie held. It did. Ron and Hermione both nodded with understanding and Ginny smiled warmly. Before they could ask why, Harry slung his bag over his shoulder and made his way over and out of the door.

Once out in the corridors, Harry took the quickest route he knew to the Owlery. He passed little to no one in the halls and after ten uneventful minutes entered the Owlery. It was, as ever, packed with hundreds of owls. Harry wasted no time; he spotted Hedwig three tiers up and called up to her, she flew down gracefully and landed gently on his shoulder.

"Up for a delivery?" he asked.

She hooted eagerly. It had been a long time since Harry had had the need to send anything. He smiled at her eagerness and walked calmly over to the small desk that was against a side wall. He placed Hedwig on a perch there and then removed the package containing the journal from his bag.

It was wrapped, Harry had at the time not realised it didn't need to be wrapped yet. He sighed and carefully peeled back two corners of the wrapping and slipped the book out of its open end. The black leather-bound journal fell to the table. Harry skimmed through the pages for a little bit before coming to rest on the first page just inside the cover. Dabbing some ink on a quill, Harry thought on what to write.

After five minutes of deliberation he settled on something simple. As neatly as he could, he wrote a small message:

Dear Ginny,

For when the thoughts become too much

Love,

Harry

Harry paused for a moment while the ink dried in his curvy script and frowned. He wasn't sure about that 'love' part but something told him to leave it as it was. Once it had dried he slipped it back into the wrapping and sealed it quickly before he changed his mind. On the front of the wrapping he wrote simply, *To Ginny*.

Harry smiled slightly and congratulated himself quietly, this was a good idea. It took him a moment to tie the package to Hedwig, but he managed it. "Now I know it says it's for Ginny. But could you take it to Mrs. Weasley at the Burrow? She'll know what to do." Hedwig hooted and nodded her white head with understanding before expanding her wings and soaring off through the early morning sky. Harry watched her go for a moment before picking up his bag and turning away, he headed happily back to the common room.

Back in the common room he discovered that his friends had abandoned him and gone off somewhere. He saw Ethan sitting by the fire and decided to ask him. Harry approached carefully. Since Diagon Alley two weeks ago, Ethan had said maybe six words to anyone. No one could really get him to talk.

"Hey, Ethan. Do you know where Ron and Hermione went?"

Rafe looked up slowly and his eyes seemed to take a moment to focus on Harry. "They went to breakfast down in the hall," he whispered. "They asked me to tell you they'd meet you down there...."

Harry nodded. "Thanks." There was a pause. "Is everything okay, Ethan?"

Rafe clicked his teeth and tapped nervously on the chair arm. "No... but it will be," he said, standing up. "It will be...."

Harry moved his pack onto his other shoulder as he and Ethan stared at each other for a moment. "Well... have a good Christmas, Ethan."

Ethan nodded and then extended his hand. Harry took it, but he did so confused. "It's been a pleasure, Harry. I'll see you later." He shook his hand a few times, with what felt like a sense of finality, and then separated. For a moment Rafe didn't move, but then before Harry knew it he was walking away. Ethan walked out of the common room, carrying nothing but the clothes on his back.

I wonder where he's going? thought Harry, but those thoughts left him when the clock on the mantelpiece struck ten. Harry cursed slightly under his breath and then turned to leave the now deserted common room. He would have to get to Hogsmeade soon.

Harry found his friends in the Great Hall twenty minutes later. Grabbing a piece of toast and swinging his bag to the floor, Harry sat down and began to eat.

"How did it go with Dumbledore?" asked Hermione.

"What? Oh! Yeah... yeah it went all right." Harry saw her frown and quickly changed the subject. "So when do the carriages leave for

Hogsmeade?"

Ron quickly glanced at his watch. "Twenty minutes, we'd better hurry."

A cold wind blew through the cloudy sky as Harry, Ron, Ginny and Hermione climbed into one of the carriages pulled by Thestrals. Harry was the only one in the group who could actually see them. It wasn't long after they were seated that the carriages took off across the frozen grounds towards the station at Hogsmeade.

Hermione was excited the whole way as the prospect of Christmas grew ever closer. Ron couldn't keep the excited smile off his face and Harry and Ginny exchanged a quick look of humour at this.

Once they arrived at the station, the first sight that greeted them was that of the scarlet steam engine that was the Hogwart's Express, well, the London Express for now. The station was packed as students struggled to get their luggage and themselves aboard the train. There were many shoves and bumps as Harry moved slowly through the crowd, getting separated from his friends in the process. He was extremely thankful that he only had to worry about the small bag on his back.

Harry had just caught sight of Ron's flame red head through the crowd when there was a small tap on his shoulder. Harry spun to face the elderly figure of Albus Dumbledore. "Hello," said Harry warily. He and Dumbledore hadn't spoken since the... outburst in his office, and now Harry felt uncomfortable.

"Good day, Harry," replied Dumbledore warmly. There was no anger or resentment in his voice. "I just thought we could have a talk before you got away."

Harry followed Dumbledore away from the crowd and over to a bench against the station building wall. He sat down next to the Headmaster on the green ark bench.

"The extra protection at the Granger's has been added this morning," he said and Harry nodded. "It is as safe as it can be under the circumstances, but I thought a little something extra might be in order." Dumbledore dug into his robes pocket for a moment and then removed a

small leather bag, about the size of a wallet or so. He passed it to Harry.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Floo powder," announced Dumbledore. "The Granger's fireplace has been connected to my own for the duration of your stay there. If anything, and I mean anything at all, out of the ordinary happens, I want you to use that to get everybody to safety." Harry nodded and thanked the old Headmaster. "It is only connected to my office, so no words are needed. Just throw a pinch to the fireplace floor."

A whistle blew from the conductor across the station and steam blew from the great engine of the train. Most of the students were on board now and it was about ready to go. Harry stood as did Dumbledore, and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Do take care of yourself, Harry," he said sounding almost pleading. "We'll talk about everything when you return on the 28th."

Harry smiled and shuffled his feet. "Thank you, Professor. Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas," called Dumbledore as Harry ran towards the now departing train and jumped on through the door before it could gather any speed. Once on, he turned and raised a hand towards Dumbledore, who did the same. Harry last saw the turrets of Hogwarts' castle, before he turned away from the door and headed into the train.

Chapter 14 - The Clouds Gather Over My World

Christmas waves a magic wand over this world, and behold, everything is softer and more beautiful.

--Norman Vincent Peale

Harry walked slowly past the small compartments aboard the Hogwarts Express. He threw the bag of floo powder from hand to hand lazily, he

was lost deep in thought. It wasn't until he accidentally dropped the bag of powder that he noticed there was a small note attached. He ripped it off and opened it in confusion:

Harry,

Please be aware that the Ministry and I have agreed to allow you to use magic away from Hogwart's. We feel it is in the best interest of your safety. Once again I must stress the need for you to be safe. Merry Christmas,

Albus Dumbledore

That's good thought Harry. He didn't have to worry about suspension notes from the Ministry. It didn't take him long to find the compartment with his friends in. Before he entered, Harry put the floo powder in the bag on his back and zipped it up; hoping against hope that he didn't have to use it this Christmas.

Upon entering the compartment he was greeted by more than just Ron and Hermione. Ginny, Neville and Luna were seated as well. Neville and Luna were seated very close together and she was showing him something out of a recent edition of the Quibbler. Ron and Hermione were also seated close together. Harry chuckled slightly as he placed his bag in the rack above the seats. They weren't eleven years old anymore.

"What kept you?" asked Ron.

"Dumbledore wanted another quick word before I left," replied Harry as he sat down next to Ginny. "You know the usual. Be careful, look after yourself...."

"We were worried you'd missed the train," said Hermione.

Harry shrugged. "If I did I would have got to London somehow? The Knight bus or something?"

Hermione nodded and then turned to look out of the window. "So what time do you think we'll get into London?" asked Harry.

"Just add about six hours to whatever time it is now," said Ginny.

"Six thirty, sevenish then," piped up Neville, who had given up interest in the Quibbler. Luna was now reading it alone.

The journey to London was a long one. On the way there Harry played at least a dozen games of Exploding snap with Ron and Neville and was now nursing several small cuts and burns. About halfway there the lady with the snack trolley came by and Harry purchased enough Chocolate Frogs and Bertie Botts Every Flavour Beans to last everyone well into Christmas and over as well. He wanted to make this a really good one.

It was getting dark when the train entered the outskirts of London. It was still about fifteen minutes away from Kings Cross. During the trip, Ron, Ginny, and Luna had fallen asleep; leaving only Harry, Hermione and Neville awake.

"How far is it to your house from the station?" asked Harry, who was playing with the drops of rain on the window.

Hermione appeared thoughtful for a moment. "It's about an hour and a half drive. Give or take five minutes."

"Where we headed again?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "How many times? You're just like Ron," she continued smiling. "My house is just outside of Oxford, in the town of Abingdon."

"Abingdon? Don't know it?"

Hermione smiled again. "You'll see."

Harry sighed and shook his head quickly, trying to keep himself awake. It had been a long, slow train ride. As he rubbed his eyes a thought came to him. "Hermione, what do your parents know about... everything?"

"Everything?"

Harry sat up straight. "You know. Everything. The war, Voldemort," Neville twitched slightly, "Hogwarts, magic. Everything!"

Hermione suddenly looked nervous and... sad. "They don't know everything," she said slowly. "They know next to nothing about you and

V-Voldemort. They do know that there is a... conflict in the wizarding world."

Harry nodded. "So if they ask, what do I tell them about me?"

She shrugged. "I'm not sure? They know your parents died when you were a baby, and that you get into a lot of trouble from time to time."

"And if they ask me about the war?"

Hermione didn't say anything for a moment. "Be honest...."

"Yeah... honest...."

As the train eased itself into the station, Harry, Hermione, and Neville woke their friends. It was a dark, cool night outside and Harry could see his breath in the light as they exited to the platform. Having little luggage thanks to the enlargement charm, Harry, Ron, and Hermione made it off the train quickly. They said goodbye to Neville and Luna and were soon on their way towards the barrier. Harry also said a brief goodbye to Ginny, and hugged her quickly.

Hermione went first, then Ron, who was closely followed by Harry. On the other side of the barrier the Muggle station was relatively empty. There were two electric trains in and several parents waiting for the child. Harry found himself feeling unaccountably nervous, he felt his palm tingling with magic as he walked, ready to use if needs be.

"MUM, DAD," shouted Hermione loudly. Harry cringed slightly as her voice echoed down the near empty station. He turned just in time to see Hermione envelope her father in a hug and then grab her mother as well. From what Harry remembered of Hermione's parents, they hadn't changed much. Mr. Granger had short, slightly receding brown hair with a few grey patches, and Harry noticed he was taller than him now. Mrs. Granger had longer hair and it was tied back in a knot across her back, she was also very short.

Harry and Ron stayed to the side during this reunion, unsure on what to do. "It's so good to see you, Hermione," said Mrs. Granger.

"And you," replied Hermione, hugging her mother again. "You remember

Harry and Ron right?"

"Of course we do." Mrs. Granger smiled warmly as she shook Ron's hand. When she came to Harry there was a flicker in her eyes that Harry couldn't identify. *Was it sadness... fear?*

"Brian Granger," said Mr. Granger, extending his hand to Ron and then Harry. Again there was something in his eyes when they met with Harry's.

Once the greetings were over, Hermione began a full recount of what she'd done last term. Harry noticed, as they walked through the now almost deserted station, that she left a great deal out concerning his activities. It was cold on their way to the car, and Harry quietly cast a small warming charm on himself. Once again he was thankful for being allowed to use magic. Mr. Granger's car was an old model 1967 Shelby GT500, his pride and joy said Hermione as her, Ron, and Harry climbed into the backseat. It was worth an arm and a leg.

Once everyone was in and seated, they were off. Harry made himself comfortable; it was an hour and a half drive away. Mr. and Mrs. Granger meanwhile, made conversation.

"So Hermione tells us you live with your Aunt and Uncle, Harry," said Mrs. Granger.

Harry opened his mouth to speak but no words came out. Hermione and Ron on the other hand, exchanged one of their worried looks. Harry finally found his voice. "No... That's, that's no longer true." He gave no further explanation and Mrs. Granger didn't push it. Ron looked at him anxiously but Harry just shook his head. *They didn't know....*

"Well we're going to have a good Christmas this year," said Mr. Granger. "Hermione's home and her friends as well. And Grandma's coming down from the Lakes also, Hermione."

"Really?" asked Hermione quickly, her face lighting up. "I've not seen her since I was eleven," she said quietly.

After ten minutes they left the streets of London and came to the motorway. The traffic wasn't that bad so Harry supposed they were

making good time. Soon street signs started to appear for Hermione's town. *Abingdon 70, Abingdon 60.*

"So there are seven positions...."

"Right," said Ron, "Two beaters, three chasers, one beater and the keeper, that's me. Harry's our team seeker."

"And what does the Seeker do?" asked Mr. Granger.

"The Seeker has to catch a small golden ball called the Snitch. If he catches it the game is over."

Harry enjoyed listening to Ron explain the finer points of Quidditch to Hermione's father, who loved Muggle football. "This is a snitch," said Harry, pulling the one he'd won in Hogsmeade out of his pocket. "I have to catch this." The snitch unfurled itself in the car and began to flutter to and fro, both Mr. and Mrs. Granger were amazed by it. After a few minutes Harry caught it deftly in his right hand and returned it to his pocket.

Soon enough they arrived at Hermione's hometown of Abingdon. It was just like one of a thousand that dotted the English countryside. A sign on the way in said it was home to 100,000 people so it wasn't small. They past by rows of small terraced houses, went through a fast food restaurant chain which amazed Ron, and through the central business district. It was eight o'clock at night so the streets weren't that busy. A few teenagers were out and about, but that was about it. They turned onto a small street named *Cumbria Way* and Hermione leaned over and told them it was just up ahead.

The houses on this street were mostly old Victorian Townhouses, definitely the homes of dentists. Most had been renovated and an extra room had been added to make it look more modern. It had started to rain slightly as Mr. Granger slowed the car to a stop and pressed a button on his dashboard. Harry saw out the window that an automatic garage door was opening on the house too the right. Mr. Granger gave it a moment and then turned onto the driveway.

Hermione's house was pretty much exactly like the other twenty five or

so on the street. It was a modest two stories, Victorian, with a few extras here and there. Most noticeably a conservatory and an extra room above the garage. But Harry only noticed those in passing as they raced to the front door to get out of the rain.

It was dark for a moment inside as Hermione fumbled for the light switch. Harry stepped to the side as Mr. Granger entered.

"Welcome home, everyone," he said to the group at large. The house was almost exactly like Harry had imagined it. It was clean and well kept. On the walls were hung pictures of Hermione from younger years, other relatives, and family friends. The hall disappeared to the living room, which at the moment was too dark to see, there were stairs leading up on the right and Harry could just see the kitchen down the back. It was, at least Harry thought, a comfortable place. It would be nice to spend a few days here.

"Right, Hermione. Show Harry and Ron upstairs to the guest room. We're going to go straight to bed; we have to be at the office early tomorrow."

"You're working on Christmas Eve?" asked Harry.

Mr. Granger smiled. "Being a dentist pays well but you're on call everyday of the year, though Christmas Day should be fine."

"Goodnight then," said Harry and Ron in unison.

Hermione's room was up the stairs and first door on the right. She pointed it out as they passed and Harry had a brief glimpse of walls covered in bookshelves, which, were in turn covered in books. She led them down the dark hall, flicking on a light switch as they went and soon came to a door with a plaque on it. *Guest Room* it said simply. There was a similar door opposite this one as well, it had the same plaque.

Inside the room held two beds and a chest of drawers. The walls were covered in flowery wallpaper and there was a large clock against the back wall just to the left of a window that overlooked the street.

Harry sighed with relief when he saw the bed, it had been a long lazy day, travelling all the way from Scotland, and he was tired. "We'll have fun

tomorrow," said Hermione, stifling a yawn. "I'll show you round town."

"Uh-huh," mumbled Harry, falling onto the bed.

"Night, then," smiled Hermione.

"Goodnight, Hermione," said Ron, hugging her slightly and kissing her on the cheek. "I'll see you in the morning."

"Not too early," replied Hermione, hugging him back. "Tomorrow is going to be a slow day."

"Why's that?" frowned Ron.

She hit him playfully on the arm. "It's Christmas Eve, of course."

Ron smiled. "Is it?" he asked softly, "I best get to sleep then."

Hermione and Ron parted and she closed the door on her way out. Ron stood in the darkness for a moment, listening to her footsteps as she walked away; it wasn't long though before he was lying down in the soft bed.

"She's great, Harry," began Ron. "Well of course you already know that, but I just... Harry? Harry are you listening to me?" There was a snore across the room and it took Ron a moment to realize he'd been talking to himself, Harry had fallen asleep. He sighed. "Night, mate," he mumbled before rolling over and falling straight to sleep.

The Lake District, Northern England

Ethan surveyed the small sleeping town of Windermere before him. He had been too late, he had missed it. Sighing, he rubbed his arm slightly from when a moment ago his Dark Mark had burned viciously and relentlessly into his skin.

Shit he thought. *Why did I hesitate... it could be days before he calls them again....*

Ethan silently berated himself for a few moments and muttered some choice curses under his breath. Eventually, and with a great deal of

sighing he looked to the night sky, dotted with stars. With a swish of his cloak, Ethan Disapparated.

It was growing again, always growing... never dying. Harry watched with increasing fear as the giant circle of light before him claimed another life into its swirling vortex. The heat coming from it was incredible; his very blood felt like it was burning. As it had happened a hundred times before, Harry was lifted off his feet and into the air towards the circle. He was a hairs breath away when it stopped spinning and disappeared into the darkness, only to be replaced by a much greater evil. Lord Voldemort.

Harry awoke to darkness and was momentarily disorientated. It took him a moment to stop panting and realize where he was. *Its all right...* he told himself *he's not here, not at Hermione's.*

Harry sighed and rubbed the sleep out of his eyes with the back of his hand. A brief glance at his watch showed him it had just gone five in the morning. He groaned again but in so doing hurt his throat. It wasn't until just now that he realized how thirsty he was, not just thirsty... parched.

"Lumos!" he croaked, raising his palm as the small sphere of light began to form on it, casting the room into shadow with its pale glow. He saw Ron blissfully fast asleep across the room, snoring heavily. Harry sighed again and slowly crept out of bed. His joints protested as he stretched them across the carpet, heading towards the door, it was just too early.

Outside in the hallway there was a small lamp alight on a wooden table to his right so Harry extinguished his wand. "Nox," he whispered and began a slow walk downstairs, towards the kitchen.

There were small noises coming from downstairs as Harry reached the landing. He frowned slightly and was immediately on his guard. *Who would be up this early?* he thought. Cautiously and quietly Harry slipped down the stairs quickly, his hand rose in front of him for defence.

Now Harry wasn't one hundred percent sure on where the kitchen was, he recalled seeing it at the end of the entrance hall last night and headed that way. The noise seemed to be coming from there anyway. It wasn't

until he approached the slightly open door, light filtering out onto the carpet, that Harry relaxed. He heard Mr. Granger laugh.

Harry let out a long held breath and for a brief moment wondered when his life had grown so troublesome that he needed to be cautious at the slightest noise. He shook his head and put a hand on the doorknob, he held it there for a moment before opening it slightly and stepping in.

The door creaked loudly as he pushed against it and his presence was made known all most instantly. He saw Mr. and Mrs. Granger look up from their coffee and newspapers, see him at the door, turn to look at each other quickly, before turning back to look at Harry. All this happened in about three seconds.

"Good morning, Harry," said Mrs. Granger kindly.

"You're an early riser," commented Mr. Granger.

Harry nodded slightly as the amount of light in the room blinded him for a moment. *Early riser...* "Yeah, yeah I always have been," he croaked.

"Oh! You sound thirsty, would you like a drink?"

"Water please," he yawned, taken a seat at the end of the table, again he saw a small nervous look pass between Hermione's parents, who, now he noticed, were up and dressed for work. *Dentists he remembered have to work early.*

Mrs. Granger placed a glass of water on the table in front of him and Harry swallowed it quickly, feeling his throat ease as the liquid past down it. He drained the glass and placed it back on the table with a sigh. "That's better..."

"Did you sleep well?" asked Mrs. Granger.

Harry looked up and into her eyes. *No....* "Yeah, yeah the bed was very comfy," he lied, rubbing the short stubble that had developed on his face overnight.

"Have you kids got anything planned for today?" asked Brian Granger.

Harry turned to him now. *Kids he thought long time since I've been a kid.*

"I think we're going to nip into town," he said, accepting a cup of tea from Mrs. Granger, he hadn't even seen her make it. "Ron will love to see a Muggle town."

Mr. and Mrs. Granger both frowned. "He's rarely been anywhere other than magical villages and places. Muggle technology will amaze him."

Mr. Granger laughed softly but Harry could tell there was something else on his mind, as with Mrs. Granger. It wasn't long before it happened.

"Harry..." began Mrs. Granger nervously.

"Janet," whispered Mr. Granger in a warning tone and shook his head slightly.

Harry frowned. "What's the matter?"

There was a moment of uneasy silence in which Mr. Granger twirled a pen between his fingers, and Mrs. Granger traced circles with her finger on the table. "Harry... are you dangerous?"

He had expected it; he was even slightly prepared for it, but was speechless when it came out. *Dangerous... yes, more than you can ever know.* "I... well I'm..." he searched for the right words, for any words. Hermione had told him to be honest, to be truthful; but the truth was horrifying, brutal, beyond most comprehension.

"We read this," continued Mrs. Granger, pulling something out from a draw in the table, it took Harry a moment to realise what it was, a simple book. It took him another moment to read the title, and when he did he cringed. "*Famous Witches and Wizards of the Twentieth Century*," recited Mrs. Granger. She looked at Harry expectantly and Harry looked to Mr. Granger who was in turn looking back at him.

"I suppose I'm in that?" he asked, already knowing that he was.

Mrs. Granger nodded. "Hermione left it here at the beginning of term. Your page was bookmarked, as was another's...."

"Voldemort...." whispered Harry, knowing he was right. The nods from Hermione's parents relieved him of any doubt. He briefly noticed that this

name held no meaning to them, their eyes were all full of questions, not fear.

"It said that he was a murderer, a *dark wizard*. He was responsible for your parents, and hundreds of other deaths, and it also said you destroyed him."

Harry nodded and raised his hand up and across his scar. *Be honest...*
"He tried to kill me, used the killing curse-"

"The what?" interrupted Mrs. Granger.

"Let him speak, Janet," said Mr. Granger, quietly but forcefully.

Harry waited a moment as they looked each other up and down. A look of mingled fear and apprehension mixed with anxiety and excitement. They both wanted to know, and weren't so sure at the same time. "The killing curse is just that. An unblockable, unstoppable, jet of green light that kills all it touches. That said, I did block it, I was only a year old at the time and don't know how I did it. My blood had something to do with it....? Anyway, Voldemort's curse rebounded upon him effectively destroying him for thirteen years...." Harry turned away from the Grangers as the memory of the graveyard surfaced... *blood of the enemy*.

Hermione's parents nodded. "Yes... it said most of that," she mumbled, opening the book to the right page and passing it to Harry. "But it didn't say he wasn't... killed, nor that he came back."

Harry briefly scanned the page. *Avada Kedavra... Halloween Night... a baby, Harry... destroyed forever...* "No. No it wouldn't. Almost everyone thought he was dead, he wasn't unfortunately."

There was an uneasy silence in the room as the first early rays of sunlight began to shine in through the window. Harry took a few sips of his tea and placed the book back on the table. "And he is definitely back now... this *Voldemort*. Murdering again," Mr. Granger whispered apprehensively.

Harry sipped his tea again. *Honest...* "Yeah," he said bitterly, clenching his jaw. "I saw him return two years ago, wasn't pretty. I won't say more than that."

Another one of those nervous glances was exchanged between Mr. and Mrs. Granger. "That was the year Hermione came home so... unhappy," said Janet Granger, nodding her head. "We tried asking her what was wrong, she said that something awful had happened, something unbelievably bad, and... and that she was really worried about you."

Harry smiled slightly but it was gone a moment later. "She did did she? Well... Voldemort... is the most evil man who has ever lived. No, he's not even human anymore. He's a monster who has literally killed thousands of people-"

"Why haven't your magical police stopped him then?" growled Mr. Granger, raising his voice slightly.

Harry laughed mirthlessly. "There called Aurors, wizard police. And there is a good reason he's never been stopped by them. And it's the simple fact that everyone who has ever tried has died...."

"You didn't..." said Mrs. Granger, looking at him with what Harry thought was... pity, maybe, mixed with a clear admiration of something that she couldn't even begin to understand.

Harry looked down into the dregs of his tea. "Yeah, but I've been lucky."

There was silence again and Harry found himself listening to the birds chirping with the sunrise in the trees outside, a simple distraction really but an affective one. He was brought back to himself as Mr. Granger spoke. "You never answered our question," he said, while Harry turned to him. "Are you a danger to Hermione?"

"Yes," he answered immediately, truthfully. "She is safe, though."

"Safe?"

"Voldemort can't touch her at Hogwarts, and it would be incredibly hard to get her here as well."

A confused expression crossed both Mr. and Mrs. Granger's faces. "Protected?"

"Magical wards, charms. Incredibly hard and complex ones that

Voldemort would have some trouble breaking through," replied Harry.

"But if he did, he would try to hurt her?"

Harry hesitated for a moment. "...Yes."

Mr. Granger stood up from the table and began to pace up and down, a mixture of emotions upon his face. Mrs. Granger meanwhile seemed to be at a loss at what to say. Her face was clear of emotion and she stared deep into him.

"We always knew she was special, always," muttered Mr. Granger, seemingly talking to himself, "we accepted what she was, were amazed by it. A witch? Who'd a thought? But this...." he trailed away.

"We want what's best for Hermione, Harry. We always will. We knew it would be best for her to go to this school so she could learn her... magic, but this business with Voldemort... having her life in danger is not what's best for her, that's obvious."

Mr. Granger sat back down and sighed heavily. "We know she won't want to abandon you, Harry, but if you've got this nutter after you who can't be stopped, then it might be best if she left Hogwarts?"

Harry's face remained blank as Brian told him this, but inside his heart was doing a mile a minute. *Hermione leave Hogwarts? She'd never leave... but her parents could not let her go?* "He would still be after her even if she wasn't close to me...." Harry finally said.

"Excuse me?" asked Mrs. Granger.

Harry sighed. "She's Muggleborn."

"She's what?"

"A magical person born to none magic parents. Voldemort's whole cause for war is over the purity of blood, he sees Hermione and those like her as scum, people not worthy of magic. It's utter bollocks of course, but he has the power to back up his threats and therefore we are at war...."

"He's racist...." said Mrs. Granger bitterly. Harry nodded.

Mr. Granger was on his feet again, pacing. "This can't be happening," he said exasperated. "She's only sixteen...."

"So am I," said Harry. "But Voldemort doesn't care." Harry stopped but Mr. and Mrs. Granger continued to stare at him, begging him with their eyes to say more. "Look. Hermione is what she is, a witch. A very clever, talented witch. That's who she is. Taking her out of Hogwarts isn't going to change that."

There were a few moments of silence as Hermione's parents seemed to have a conversation without actually saying anything, but Harry could see when they came to a decision. "You can assure us she is safe at Hogwarts?"

"Voldemort cannot touch her there, no matter how hard he tries. Unless I personally tell him she is at Hogwart's, then he can never get her there," Harry replied honestly.

Mr. Granger stared hard at him. "We're trusting you with her safety, Harry. As much as we would like to protect her, and we do, this world of hers, of yours, is beyond us. If you say she is safe we'll believe you."

Harry nodded and placed his now empty cup on the table. He glanced down at his watch and saw that it was six thirty; he'd been talking for an hour. Mrs. Granger seemed to have just noticed the time as well. "Oh! Brian, we have to be at the practice in half an hour."

Mr. Granger nodded and rubbed his clean shaven face. "You've been honest with us, Harry. I respect that. Thank you for giving us some answers. Not what we were expecting but... thank you."

"You're welcome," he said as they put on their coats and Mrs. Granger collected her handbag.

"We'll see you later on tonight then, Harry," Mr. Granger said, shaking his hand. "Have a good day."

Mrs. Granger came up to him next. She paused a moment and looked into his eyes. Then, surprising Harry, hugged him tightly like Mrs. Weasley did. It felt very motherly. "Thank you for everything there, Harry. I'm so happy Hermione's got such a good friend. Merry Christmas." She

let him go and Harry tried to reply, but it had been so unexpected he couldn't form words, so he just nodded.

Ten minutes later Harry finished brewing another cup of tea, he could have used magic but he felt it tasted better without. It was still early, and he didn't expect Ron or Hermione to be up for another few hours, so he picked up his cup of tea and opened the back kitchen door.

Outside it was cold, freezing cold. Harry shivered as he sat in a chair overlooking the stunning view of a forest in the distance. Hermione's house was on the end of an estate so there was nothing but countryside behind it. He was sat at an outside table, the kind with four seats and an umbrella sticking out the centre to provide shade when in the sun.

Harry shivered again and then pointed his hand at his shirt he was still wearing from last night. "*Transjumsio!*" he said quietly. His thin black shirt transfigured into a thick woolly jumper, Harry felt warmer almost instantly.

Now that he wasn't distracted by the cold, Harry noticed just how nice it was out here in the early morning. The seat he was sat at was placed on a porch that was raised off the ground above the rest of the garden. It gave an impressive view of the countryside around. There was no noise, save from small animals. The roads behind him on the other side of the house were empty this early in the morning and Harry found himself loving the quiet. Of course it was too good to last. Harry was just sipping his tea when a sudden short stab of pain ripped across his scar. It was a daily occurrence, but he was never ready for it and he dropped his cup with surprise and pain. It shattered as it hit the ground. He cursed as the pain passed and clasped a hand to his forehead. "*Reparo!*" he said sighing, pointing his other hand at the broken cup.

The small mug repaired itself and jumped back into Harry's outstretched hand. He sighed again at the now empty cup and placed it on the table. It wasn't until now he realised, that he was pretty hungry. The last thing he'd eaten would have been a chocolate frog on the train yesterday. Harry gave the world one last look and then picked up the mug and headed back inside.

It was still early in the morning and he didn't know when Ron and

Hermione would be awake. Harry supposed no one would mind if he made himself some toast, so he did. After searching through the cupboards he came across the bread, and also the toaster. It didn't take long and soon Harry was seated at the table, with a plate of toast and a new cup of tea.

He had just got into the toast and was relaxing in the quiet when it was suddenly pierced. Harry jumped as a screech emanated from the window above the sink. It took him a moment to see the owl seated on the sill, and when he did he walked over and let it in. As he had suspected, it was the *Prophet* bird, and it was after Hermione.

"She's asleep," Harry told the owl, digging around in his magically bigger pockets for a Knut. The owl waited patiently on the back of his wooden chair while Harry produced the money. He removed the *Prophet* and gave the owl a small piece of toast to eat whilst he placed the money in its pouch. It hooted appreciatively before springing from the chair and back out the window and up into the sky.

Harry silently returned to his seat and took a sip of his tea before unfolding the paper. He dreaded reading it of a morning, one death after another. It reminded him that while he does nothing, people are dying. Voldemort *is* his problem, but Harry knew he was no where near ready to fight him yet. It made him feel utterly useless....

He breathed a sigh of relief at the headline. ***Christmas Festival To Be Held In Diagon Alley To Increase Business.*** Harry tossed the paper aside, if death wasn't headline news, it was no news at all, which was good. He finished his toast and with a wave of his hands the plate cleaned itself and returned to the cabinet from where he'd got it.

Harry was just about to go upstairs and change into some clean, fresh clothes when he heard something coming from the hall. He strained to hear the sound, it was... somebody trying to open the front door, but it was locked. Harry crept quietly from the kitchen into the hall, his hand tingling with magic as he went. A brief glance at his watch showed him it was coming up eight o'clock. The handle was still being shaken strongly and Harry could hear a groan of frustration from outside. A hundred and one thoughts were running through Harry's head. *Was it an*

enemy? A Death Eater? His fears were squashed though when there was a loud, resounding knock on the door.

A Death Eater wouldn't knock he thought and slightly lowered his hand. Harry remained cautious, though as he clicked the lock open and turned the handle of the door.

"Who are you?" demanded an elderly woman on the step in a strong Barovian accent.

Harry was momentarily at a loss for words at the sight before him. Standing on the door step was an old woman, at least eighty, and behind her were several suitcases and one cat basket containing one huge tabby cat. After a moment Harry finally found his voice. "Who are you?"

"Don't give me that cheek, boy! You must be one of Hermione's friends. I'm Mrs. Granger, her grandmother and you?"

Harry breathed a sigh of relief when all the pieces fell into place. "I'm Harry, Harry Potter."

"Harry? Well, you can help an old lady with her bags then, Harry. Mind the cat and the green bag has valuable china in it, break it and you'll be sorry."

"But-"

"No buts, boy. You'll do what your elders tell you."

Without even so much as a please or a thank you, Mrs. Granger walked up the steps and into the house. Harry stared at the large amounts of luggage before him and laughed. He had been foolish to think there was a Death Eater at the door and had been foolish to be tricked into carrying this lot inside.

It took Harry ten minutes to lug all the bags into the house to the bottom of the stairs. The cat was most difficult as it scratched at his hands through the plastic bars of its cage. In the end Harry subtly levitated the animal inside.

He had just placed the cat on the pile of bags when Mrs. Granger

returned. "Thank you, dear," she said. "Now just up the stairs and it's the second door on the left. Mind the china!"

Harry was still recuperating from lifting the heavy bags inside, the prospect of lugging them up the stairs seemed impossible. Luckily he was saved. "Grandma!" cried an excited voice from the top of the stairs.

Both Harry and Mrs. Granger turned to the voice. "Hermione, dear," said Mrs. Granger as Hermione came bounding down the stairs. "Wonderful to see you again."

"And you," she replied, throwing her arms around her grandmother. "I see you've met, Harry."

"Oh yes, he was just taking my bags upstairs. Weren't you dear?"

Harry opened his mouth to protest and turned to look at Mrs. Granger, and then Hermione, and then the bags, and then the stairs, and then the cat, and then finally back to Mrs. Granger. He lost all his fight. "Yes," he said realising he wouldn't win an argument and it would just be petty anyway.

Hermione smiled at him and Mrs. Granger did as well, but hers was one of victory. She and Hermione turned and walked up the hall and into the kitchen. "Mind the china," she called back just as she disappeared from sight.

Harry sighed at the bags before him but had a quick idea as he did. Checking to see that Mrs. Granger was no where in sight, Harry levitated the first three bags with a wave of his hand. Doing it this way Harry got the bags upstairs and into the second guest room effortlessly, even the damn cat was no trouble.

Once it was done, Harry decided against going back downstairs, lest he get drawn to complete another task, instead he returned to what he was planning to do before Mrs. Granger arrived. He went back into his room to find that Ron was still asleep. After rummaging through his small backpack Harry pulled out a pair of his black jeans and a black collared short sleeve shirt. It took him a moment to take everything out of his current pants and place it in the new jeans pocket, but he did.

There was a small bathroom that had a shower attached their room and Harry found that towels had been set out for their use. Harry showered quickly under the hot spray of the water, it was refreshing. He stood under the spray and thought about how today had already been really eventful and he'd only been up three hours.

After showering Harry used his wand to shave. It was one of the few things he still used his wand for, it was a lot more accurate than his hand and a lot less painful too, considering a razor sprang out of the end of the wand. *Might hurt a bit* he thought *if it came out of my hand*. Harry had been practising wandless magic whenever he could, he avoided using his wand wherever possible. The reason: if he duelled with Voldemort, the brother wand affect probably wouldn't happen if he didn't use his wand. Or at least Harry hoped that when the time came it wouldn't. He was almost proficient in all magic that could be easily done with a wand. He hadn't tried a Patronus without a wand, nor the Apparation spell, and he wasn't in a hurry to either.

Harry emerged from the bathroom fresh and wearing clean clothes. He stepped back into the room just as Ron was rising. "Morning," said Harry brightly, waving his hand so the curtains shielding the window across the room opened.

Ron cringed and sat up in bed cursing as sunlight assaulted his eyes. "Bloody hell, Harry," he moaned, grabbing some clothes out of his bag and standing up. "It's too damn early."

"It's gone eight, and I've been up several hours."

Ron mumbled something incoherently as he passed Harry and entered the bathroom, closing the door behind him. Harry smiled and shook his head at Ron's inability to function after just waking up.

Half an hour later all three of them were sitting around the table with Hermione's grandmother. There was small conversation as Harry offered to cook the breakfast. A decade of doing it for the Dursleys meant it was second nature. He cooked the bacon and eggs with toast, but he himself had cereal.

There was careful conversation around Mrs. Granger, as she didn't

know anything about the magical world. It would take too much to explain right now and she was better off not knowing. So that pretty much excluded Ron from saying anything

After breakfast Mrs. Granger announced she was going to bed, having been travelling all night she was tired. Harry breathed a sigh of relief at this, he found her very bossy, as did Ron, but neither of them mentioned this to Hermione.

"So what are we doing today then?" asked Ron, finishing his breakfast and pushing the plate aside.

"Let's go into town," said Hermione happily. "There are shops and we can get lunch and have Christmas fun!"

"Christmas fun?" commented Harry, whilst Ron just laughed.

Hermione smiled sheepishly but smiled just the same. "I'll go get ready. Be about half an hour. Why don't you show Ron the TV, Harry?"

As Hermione went up the stairs, Harry and Ron went into the living room and sat down on the plush leather sofa. "Is that the thing that Muggles watch moving pictures on?" asked Ron. Harry nodded and picked up the remote control, he also noticed the Christmas tree in the corner. It was real and roughly seven feet high, it was decorated very efficiently. It looked good. He hit the button and the screen came to life.

To say Ron was amazed would have been an understatement. After pulling the remote off Harry he began flicking through every channel faster than it was humanly possible to watch it. It being Christmas, most of the stations were showing Christmas movies and cartoons. "Muggles are amazing," said Ron shaking his head. "I'll have to ask Dad if we can get one of these...."

The channel hopping continued all the way until Hermione came bounding down the stairs. She was dressed casually for a day in town, jumper and jeans and she had her hair tied back in a knot. Harry stood up and walked across the room to her. "Ready, Ron?"

It took Ron a moment to figure out how to turn the television off, but he got there in the end. "Let's go," Hermione said happily, grasping Ron's

hand in her own and opening the front door.

It had warmed up a little bit outside now, since Harry had sat on his own, it was now just above freezing. There was no snow at the moment, but the clouds above threatened it. As they walked down the path, a cool wind blew and Harry pulled his jacket closer around himself. Harry also saw a brief flicker of orange light as they passed the gate and was sure no one else did, he left it for now.

"How far is it in to town then?" he asked once they were out on the sidewalk.

"From here it's... three miles-" said Hermione.

"Three miles!" cried Ron.

Hermione just smiled. "That's why we're walking a hundred yards to the bus stop."

Harry laughed and Ron did as well, but his was with relief. They didn't have to wait long for a bus. It being Christmas Eve, they were every ten minutes. The old bus came to a hard stop on the slippery road in front of them and the doors separated with a small hiss. "All aboard," said Hermione happily.

The bus was decked out for Christmas. Well the bus company had made an effort anyway. There was tinsel draped across the windows complete with flashing green lights and the bus driver himself was wearing a Santa hat. Harry, Ron, and Hermione took seats up the back of the bus and soon they were off.

Harry hadn't told Hermione about his talk with her parents yet, but he felt like he should. The problem now was, the bus was carrying about ten Muggles, he'd have to be careful when he spoke. "Your parents asked me some things this morning," he whispered.

Hermione turned to look at him sharply. "You were up that early?"

"Just recurring Voldemort dreams, noting to worry about. Anyway your parents..."

"What did they ask, and what did you tell them?"

Harry thought for a moment. "They found a book you left at the beginning of the year. Famous Witches and Wizards of the Twentieth Century, some of the pages were bookmarked, are you following me?"

Hermione nodded grimly. "They asked you about *him*?" Harry nodded now.

"What did you tell them?" asked Ron.

"The truth," shrugged Harry. "You told me to be honest, so I was."

"Yes, but how honest were you?"

Harry thought about this again. "They know about Voldemort, and his rebirth, and that he's started another war. They also know you're in danger for knowing me...."

Hermione blinked and looked down. "I'd rather be in danger than not know you," she said quietly, while Ron nodded.

Harry smiled. "I know, and I told them that. I also told them about the protection at Hogwarts. They're glad you can be safe from him there."

Hermione sighed with relief. "I was worried that maybe they'd want to take me out of Hogwarts...."

"They did mention that," said Harry. "But I explained there was no safer place than Hogwarts."

"Thanks, Harry," said Hermione, squeezing his hand as the bus came to a stop.

"It's okay," he replied as the bus started moving again.

"They can't just stop you going to Hogwarts, though, can they?" asked Ron.

Hermione frowned. "I suppose they could, until I'm of age I think they could."

"But they won't," Harry assured Ron. "They know it's the safest place to

be."

The conversation turned to lighter topics as the bus wound its way through the suburbs of Abingdon. Eventually the houses were replaced by shops and businesses, and Hermione reached over and pushed the button for the bell.

The three of them emerged on a busy street that was packed with shoppers going to and fro from shop to shop, all trying to get in some last Christmas shopping. Harry found it a lot noisier than what he was used to. This wasn't Hogsmeade, there were cars and buses and hundreds of people. It was very suffocating.

"What are we going to do now then?" he asked.

"Not sure," said Hermione, while Ron shrugged. "Do any of you need to go shopping?"

"Did it all in Hogsmeade," Harry said, though mindful of the people passing.

There was silence for a moment, while no ideas came to mind. Harry watched the passers by with caution. However safe he felt at the Grangers, that was lost when he left the house. Anyone of the hundreds of people in this shopping district could be a Death Eater, with a wand at the ready. Crowds made him nervous.

"I know," said Hermione quickly, bringing Harry out of his thoughts. "We could go to the pictures."

"The what?" asked Ron.

"The movie theatre," said Harry.

"The what?" asked Ron again.

Hermione smiled and Harry laughed slightly, putting his hands in his pockets. "I think it better if we show you, Ron," smiled Hermione, taking his hand again. "Come on, there's one in the shopping centre around the corner."

Harry found himself walking behind Ron and Hermione, with a good view

of the street ahead, whilst protecting them from behind. He didn't voice his concerns to them, as he was probably just worrying about nothing, but he was nervous about being out in the open. Harry wondered briefly, as they walked past nicely decorated shops and across an intersection, as to when he would ever feel safe to do something as simple as walking down the street without worrying that someone may jump out and try to kill him or his friends. Without having to constantly worry about war and death, when he could be normal. The answer, sadly, he realised was never... Voldemort would not go silently, if he went at all and even after that he may not be safe, if he survived the battle that was.

Harry felt it coming, the final battle, the end. He knew it was just over the horizon, a year or two at best before the fight would be decided, one way or another... He watched Ron and Hermione as he walked; saw the small smiles they gave each other, they were, for use of a better phrase, in love with one another. And that made him smile, but then he thought of the prophecy. Could he ever tell them of it? Of his Fate? Kill or be killed....

He was sure they'd understand of course and support him all the way. And that's what scared him. They would support him all the way. Despite the fear they both held for Voldemort they would both want to be there when he faced him for the final time. Harry didn't want that, he couldn't see them there. *They would be a distraction* he thought *I'd have to look out for their safety, when I should be fighting him....*

But in a small corner of his mind, Harry realised that they should be there. It was his fight that much was clear, but the road he took to get there would be one he shared with his friends. There was no other reasoning to be done. They'd be there, at the end, by his side as he fought for the world. By his side just like the past six years...

His thoughts had taken him all the way to a car park that held about fifteen hundred cars. It was the car park for the shopping centre that stood about four hundred metres away. There were signs for all types of shops that they past as they walked. About a dozen for fast food alone and fifty for retail outlets and clothes shops. There was also one that said quite clearly: *Grand Cinemas*.

Hermione was leading them towards what Harry supposed was the main entrance to the shopping complex. They passed by busy shoppers and dodged cars as they crossed the parking lot. After a few minutes they reached the entrance to what the sign said was *Abingdon Shopping Centre*.

They entered the giant building. Ron's first reaction was to stand with his mouth hanging open as he took in the shopping centre. Harry was not that impressed. If he was honest he liked the quiet of Hogsmeade village better. This was too loud, and filled with too much commercialism. It was strange how life at Hogwarts made him forget places like this. *At least it should be relatively quiet in the movie theatre* he thought as Hermione showed Ron subtly how to use the escalator.

They took the escalator up twice and got off on the third floor. The entrance to the cinema, according to the directional sign posts, was at the end of this floor. I didn't take the three of them long to find it, nor would it have been hard to miss as the big bright neon lights reflected down upon them. Harry could see Ron was excited, and he could see that Hermione was looking happy as well. He supposed he was enjoying the day as well.

The movies were busy. It appeared every parent in the town had had the bright idea of taking their kids to the see a movie on Christmas Eve, as a way to pass the time. Again Harry found himself scanning the crowds for anyone that looked suspicious. "What should we see?" asked Hermione excitedly when the reached the film information board.

"You two should decide," said Ron, "I have absolutely no idea about what's going on. And... and what is that smell?"

"Popcorn," said Harry. And then added. "In a minute."

"Okay... what's on...?" Hermione said to herself. "How about Independence Day?"

Harry picked up a leaflet from the desk that advertised the movie. He read from it: "It is an ordinary summer day. But then, without warning, something very extraordinary happens. Enormous shadows fall across the land. Strange atmospheric phenomena, ominous and mesmerizing,

surface around the globe. All eyes turn upward. The question of whether we're alone in the universe has finally been answered. And, in a matter of minutes, the lives of every person across the globe are forever changed. With the fate of our planet at stake, the Fourth of July is about to take on an entirely new meaning. No longer will it be an American holiday. It will be known as the day the entire world fought back. The day we did not go silently into the good night... The day all of us on planet Earth celebrated our independence day...."

"I understood three words in all of that," said Ron happily.

"Sounds very action packed and American," commented Hermione.

Harry laughed. "What else is there?"

Hermione read the board. "William Shakespeare's: Romeo and Juliet, starring Leonardo Dicaprio. Jerry Maguire, starring Tom Cruise. Bulletproof starring Adam Sandler. The Hunch Back of Notre Dame...."

Harry stared at the board in silence for a moment. "You know, five and a half years in a different world and I have no idea who or what these people and movies are?"

"Let's just go see that first one," said Ron, figuring out how to properly read the electric board. "Look, it starts in ten minutes."

So it was decided. "Independence Day, then," agreed Hermione and Harry. "Let's go buy the tickets," he ended.

As they walked over to the ticket counter, Harry pulled out his money bag and removed two ten pound notes from within. He still had a roll of the Muggle money that he had got changed in Diagon Alley back in September. Hermione also pulled a ten pound note out of her purse, but Ron, Ron took a few Galleons out of his pocket.

"You can't use those," said Harry. "Here." Harry tried to give Ron a ten pound note but he wouldn't accept it. Ever since his dad had become the acting Minister, Ron hadn't been bad off for money. He'd even had some new robes and books sent to Hogwarts for him, but he was still touchy on the subject. Harry sighed. "All right, give me a galleon for it."

"Yeah... that's fair," agreed Ron with a smile, trading Harry a galleon for a ten pound note.

"Why don't you go get popcorn and I'll get the tickets," said Harry, noticing the long line at both counters. "It won't take as long then."

Ron and Hermione agreed and went off to pay for the popcorn, whilst Harry got the tickets. Hermione changed Ron's ten pound note down into coins so she could give Harry some money for the tickets, and they were off.

Harry walked over to the back of the queue and placed his hands in his pockets, having his first real look around the cinema. There was neon bands of blue and gold light on everything, including the ceiling that was pin pricked with little bulbs of light that resembled stars. The floor had a repetitive spiral pattern in the same colours of the lights and the counters were of a same pattern.

The line quickly shortened and it wasn't long before Harry found himself second in the line. He could see Ron and Hermione across the plaza waiting in line at the sweet shop, Ron was still gazing around at the sights around him and Hermione was having a hard time making it appear that Ron was nothing more than a Muggle, especially when he laughed at the machine which dispensed the popcorn.

Harry smiled and shook his head as he moved ahead in the line to the ticket desk. "Why, you're a looker," said the young woman from behind the desk with a smile.

Harry was momentarily taken back by the suddenness of this question. He looked at the girl behind the desk and didn't have to be told that she was attractive; he could see that for himself. She had shoulder length brown hair that just brushed her shoulders, blue eyes that at the moment were looking Harry up and down appreciatively. She was dressed in the uniform for this theatre. Though her attitude reminded him strongly of Luna Lovegood, quick and to the point.

"Er- Thanks," he said. "Three for Independence Day, please."

She smiled a very suggestive smile. "You and your girlfriend here to see

the movie?" she asked innocently, typing on the screen.

"No... no, just here with my friends."

"Really," she smiled again and turned to look at him as the tickets printed. Harry saw her eyes flick to his forehead and was sure she took in the scar. At the moment it was slightly red as it hadn't scabbed over from the last time it had opened. "Nasty looking scar you've got there," she said, nodding towards the scar.

"Hmm..." agreed Harry, handing over some money for the tickets without any further explanation. "Nice talking to you," he said taking the tickets.

"And you," she smiled again.

Harry smiled and walked away, he found his friends waiting for him with drinks and popcorn at the barrier to the screens. "Hi," he said accepting a box of popcorn and drink from Hermione. He handed the three tickets over to the bloke standing on guard.

"Cinema two," he said roughly without even looking at them and tearing the ticket in half, handing the stubs back to Harry.

Five minutes later the three of them were seated up the back row of cinema two as the room slowly filled up around them. By the time the film started it was roughly half full, and no one paid them any particular attention up in the back corner of the room. It wasn't long before the film started.

Harry couldn't help but laugh at Ron's reaction to the film. The lights and sounds made him jump and Hermione was spending the better part of the film explaining to Ron what special effects were, and how entire cities hadn't really been destroyed, nor was the planet under invasion from an alien species hell bent on killing us all.

The plot didn't seem to matter to Ron, though; he seemed to be more interested in listening to Hermione's explanations. Harry smiled at this; he himself didn't much care for the film. Sure it made him laugh in parts but it was all too explosive.

"That was bloody brilliant," announced Ron upon emerging from cinema

two. "Muggles do have some good ideas," he said shaking his head.

"That Will Smith is a good actor," commented Harry, throwing his rubbish into the bin as he passed. "Who's for some lunch?"

Ron nodded, as did Hermione. Ten minutes later they were sitting in a little café that was part of the food court at the shopping centre. A small place called The Lakeside Café, which didn't make any sense considering they weren't anywhere near a lake. Anyway, Harry ordered a burger and chips, so did Ron. Hermione ordered a salad.

As they ate Hermione talked about Christmas tomorrow. Harry briefly looked at his watch as she talked and realized it was two o'clock. *That movie had to have been at least two hours long* he thought, finishing his burger.

After lunch the three of them decided it would probably be best if they went back home. Harry was inwardly relieved, as he knew the wards were a very good protection. He'd figured out that the brief flash of orange light that he had seen upon leaving the Grangers had in fact been the wards, and he felt that they were strong.

Two hours later, they were home. Hermione had insisted on going to the shops first and buying some chocolate and sweets for Christmas tomorrow. So it was about four thirty when they finally opened the door to the house and stepped into the warmth.

Harry and Ron went upstairs, while Hermione went into the living room. Harry placed his jacket across the back of his bed and took off his shoes and socks, Ron did the same. "That movie was really... different," said Ron, sitting down on his bed.

"You enjoyed it though," replied Harry, picking up his backpack and rummaging around in it.

"What you looking for?"

"For the presents I brought. You know, so I can put them under the tree."

"Ah!" said Ron. "I knew I'd forgotten something I had to do." He pulled open his own bag and began rummaging.

The rest of the afternoon was spent downstairs in front of the television. Hermione's grandmother came down the stairs at one point and asked Harry to help he lift her suitcases into the cupboard. Harry, not wanting to upset anyone, obliged, while Ron struggled to hide his laughter.

"So you go to the same school as Hermione, dear?" asked Mrs. Granger.

"Yeah... yeah I do."

"Fine school that," she said nodding. Harry had no idea what she was talking about, she didn't know of Hogwarts, so she must be talking about some other boarding school. "How long are you staying here, boy?"

"Until the twenty eighth," he answered, lifting her suitcase up onto the top of the cupboard with difficulty. "You?"

"I'll be heading back to Windermere on boxing day. Don't like to leave all my cats..."

Harry nodded but didn't say anything. She had so much luggage and she was only here for two days? With a heavy sigh he lifted the final suitcase up and began panting heavily. *Were they full of bricks?* he thought, as he began to make his way towards the door.

"Wait a minute, dear," said Mrs. Granger. Harry stopped and turned, dreading having to move another suitcase or cat. "Have a humbug, dear," she said smiling, offering a small white paper bag to him.

Harry smiled and removed one of the small liquorice sweets from within. "Thanks," he said, popping it into his mouth before heading back downstairs. He was on the fifth step from the bottom when the front door opened and in walked Mr. and Mrs. Granger. Apparently it had started snowing outside, because a strong breeze followed them in bringing snow flakes with it.

"Brrr..." shivered Mrs. Granger, removing her coat and placing it on the hook. "Oh! Harry," she said spotting him. "How was your day?"

"Fine," he said continuing down the stairs. "We showed Ron a movie theatre, he was stunned."

Mr. Granger laughed. "Did my mother arrive?"

Harry smiled. "Yeah. She's upstairs with a cat, I was just helping her with her luggage."

Brian Granger thanked him and moved up the stairs. Mrs. Granger meanwhile was staring at him.

"What?" he asked self consciously.

"I just wanted to thank you again," she said, "for the answers this morning."

Harry smiled. "Don't worry about it. I'd want to know if I were you."

"Thanks just the same." There was a moment of silence. "I best start dinner," Mrs. Granger finally said, walking away towards the kitchen.

Harry stood in thought for a moment before sighing and entering the living room again. "Did I hear my parents?" asked Hermione as Harry took a seat.

"Yep," he said sucking on the humbug. "Your mum's in the kitchen."

"What's that you're eating?" asked Ron.

"Humbug," answered Harry.

"From grandma?" asked Hermione. Harry nodded. "Oh, that means she likes you."

"Likes me to help lift her luggage," he ended and Ron laughed.

Dinner that night was a simple steak and mash, but Harry enjoyed the atmosphere at the table. It felt good to talk about normal everyday things at a normal everyday dinner. Mr. and Mrs. Granger talked about their day at work, while Grandma Granger went through a list of her latest cat ailments, and Ron and Hermione talked about the day in town. Harry was happy just to listen in the warmth as he sipped the red wine that Mrs. Granger had bought. This was how he imagined family, and although it wasn't his, he was just glad to be part of it for now.

Harry felt very full and happy as he and Ron and Hermione walked up

the stairs at nine thirty. They said their goodnights quickly and after brushing his teeth, Harry fell cosily into bed. *It had been a good day* he thought as sleep began to take hold. *And tomorrow, Christmas, promised to be just as good....*

Chapter 15 - The Calm Before the Storm

Christmas--that magic blanket that wraps itself about us, that something so intangible that it is like a fragrance. It may weave a spell of nostalgia. Christmas may be a day of feasting, or of prayer, but always it will be a day of remembrance--a day in which we think of everything we have ever loved.

--Augusta E. Rundel

We'll meet soon....

Harry awoke with a start, an intense burning in his head. But strangely not from his scar... it was something else, something had spoken to him and it had hurt. He rolled over in bed as his conscious mind slowly let go of the pain. He counted backwards from ten, doing anything to distract himself from the burning. After a few minutes the pain did let up, and Harry sighed with relief.

It was just then that he realised it was Christmas. Christmas Day and he was at the Granger's. It promised to be a nice calm day, with little to no distractions. Harry glanced at the clock on the wall across the room; it had just gone seven thirty. *Not bad* he thought *I slept in today....*

Harry rolled over and let his legs fall off the bed. He sat there for a minute and rubbed his eyes of sleep. With a heavy yawn he reached over to the cabinet and replaced his glasses, he stood as he did this. Ron was still heavily asleep in his bed, his snores echoing loudly throughout the room.

Harry walked gingerly, his limbs aching slightly from early morning use. After a short visit to the bathroom, Harry changed from his pyjamas into his customary black shirt and jeans. He'd thought of buying some new clothes last Hogsmeade visit, but in the end decided that black suited him well enough. He returned to the bathroom and made a fool's attempt to flatten his hair. He'd let it grow out a bit over the past month and it was just beyond his ears, not as scruffy as it had originally been, but manageable.

He also removed the earring of the griffin he'd gotten those long months ago in Diagon Alley. It felt like he'd got it years ago, when it had barely been three months. A lot had happened in those three months. Harry made a mental list... *Dementor Attack, Order of Merlin disaster, Padma's abduction, Diagon Alley massacre....*

Harry still felt very guilty for what had happened to Padma, and if truth be told he missed talking to her. It had felt good to have someone close, *too good*, for it didn't last. Harry shook his head as these thoughts began to cloud his mind. *Not today*. With a little sigh he replaced the earring and returned to the bedroom.

There was a moment's silence in the room before it was shattered as the door burst open. "MERRY CHRISTMAS," cried Hermione happily, jumping over and throwing her arms around him. "Merry Christmas, Harry."

Harry laughed as he saw sleeping Ron jerk awake so suddenly that he nearly fell out of the bed. Hermione's scream had awoken him. "Merry Christmas," he said, hugging her back as Ron stumbled to his feet with a little un-Christmas like cursing.

Ethan sat calmly in the small café, the world passing him by. He picked lazily at the bacon and eggs in front of him, he wasn't really hungry. This café was a twentyfour hours, seven days a week, three hundred and sixty five days a year, place. It was open, even on Christmas.

Rafe didn't care that it was Christmas, though. He was waiting patiently for it to happen, as he knew it would soon. Over the past month his Mark

had burned at least once every other day, Voldemort was stepping up his war.

It happened just as he finished his coffee. The burning tearing down into his flesh. A small gasp of pain escaped his lips but that was all. *It was now or never...* he thought *Time to face him....*

Glancing around the café he made sure that no Muggle was watching, with a deep breath and one last final moment of hesitation. Ethan Apparated to the source of the Mark.

"Thanks, Hermione," said Harry happily as he unwrapped his present from her. It was a book, of course, entitled: *Wandless Magic: Its Use & History*. Harry briefly skimmed through the book before placing it to the side.

"You're welcome," she smiled.

Mrs. Granger also spotted the title of the book. "Is wandless magic easier than normal magic?" she asked.

Ron laughed and Hermione sighed. "For Harry it is. But it's easier for the rest of us to use a wand."

Harry smiled and sat back on the chair, eating a few jellybeans. Ron and Hermione knew about Gryffindor's ability to perform complex wandless magic, and Harry wondered briefly if that would be in the book Hermione had gotten him. His being Gryffindor's heir meant the ability had passed on to him. Also, Ron, and the rest of the Weasleys, had gotten him something more practical than a book, though.

It was a wand holster. An extremely nice and useful one. It was made of black dragonhide and was just as tough. It fit perfectly on to his right wrist and went roughly the length of his arm down to the elbow. It was enchanted; despite being basically indestructible it was enchanted to send his wand flying into his hand with a simple thought. Harry was wearing it now and marvelled at its ability to send his wand shooting into his hand. It came so fast it was impossible to see it happen. Before he could blink it was in his hands. Also, and this was the feature Harry

thought the most clever, was the wards and charms that the holster held and incorporated. If his wand was in the holster, it couldn't be removed by anyone but the wearer, nor could the disarming charm remove it. It was a very nice present.

Ron loved his Cannons book, and Hermione also liked hers. Also it appeared that Hermione and Ron chose their gifts for each other together. They both gave one another a golden necklace with half an amulet on it. When held together, the amulet formed a circular crest that depicted two figures in a lovers embrace. Harry thought it was quite touching, and a very 'couple' thing to do. Mr. and Mrs. Granger just smiled knowingly at the necklace, neither saying anything.

Harry was thankful that Grandma Granger was still asleep, and had denied all efforts to get her up and down stairs for the present opening. Harry felt it would have been a bit tricky explaining away all the magical items and books.

It was early morning, around ten, when everything was done with. Mrs. Granger had gone off to start cooking Christmas dinner, and, from what Harry could smell, it promised to be good. Grandma Granger had also woken up and was now helping in the kitchen. Mr. Granger kept walking in from time to time but Harry could tell he was more of a hindrance than a help, as Mrs. Granger constantly evicted him. So eventually he gave in, and watched the football video he'd received from his wife this morning.

Ron and Hermione were talking quietly on the sofa, smiles on their faces as they read from the same book. Harry was on the single chair across the room, just to the left of the Christmas tree, also reading his new book on wandless magic. The first thing he did was look up Godric Gryffindor, and he wasn't disappointed. The book had a whole section devoted to him and the author wrote as if with a great reverence. He wrote with an awe and profound respect. Harry noticed this as he read:

Wandless Magic: Use in History

Chapter VIII: Godric Gryffindor

Probably the most famous practitioner of wandless magic in known history; is Godric Gryffindor. One of the four founders of Hogwarts

School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, he gave his name, as did Salazar Slytherin, to a house of the school. His proficiency in wandless magic has been unmatched since his death nine hundred and seven years ago...

Harry flicked to the inside cover of the book and checked the publication date. It was published two years ago; this information was recent and fairly accurate.

...years ago at the age of one hundred and seventy. Many believe that Gryffindor's long life, even by wizarding standards, was attributed to his connection with magic. Wandless magic, long believed an Art capable of only a select few, was second nature to Gryffindor, who was known to rarely use his wand to channel magic, relying more on his unique ability.

Through this magic Gryffindor accomplished many great deeds, one such deed was magically tying his family's blade, his sword to himself and anyone in his direct bloodline. A magical blade, the sword of Gryffindor, could absorb low level to medium power curses....

Harry twisted his left arm and felt for the blade he knew to be there, just out of sight, should he ever need it. It had been a while since he'd called for it, but it was still there, still waiting. Harry could almost feel it in his hand, the cold metal brushing his skin, but it didn't materialise. He would have had a hard time explaining that one away to Mr. Granger. He read on:

...curses and was Gryffindor's weapon of choice in the final battle against the Dark Lord Slytherin...

Harry paused, his pose becoming rigid, all his thoughts now bent on the text. Nothing short of Voldemort himself arriving could have torn Harry's eyes away from the page.

....Slytherin on July 31st 998 A.D. at the ancient magic well of Stonehenge. This was the first defeat of a Dark Lord in documented history, and it cost Godric Gryffindor everything he loved. After the battle, Gryffindor disappeared, the surviving wizard community praised their hero and promoted him to martyr. Gryffindor was believed dead, destroyed, his body gone but he was remembered because he took the

darkness, Slytherin, with him.

Godric Gryffindor was, and still remains, the world's strongest ever mage in the Art of wandless magic. He was remembered as a hero, the world's saviour. Slytherin's war over the purity of blood claimed thousands, if not hundreds of thousand of lives.

Harry stopped reading and sighed heavily, the impossible running through his mind. *This had to be coincidence* he thought. *Gryffindor vs. Slytherin a thousand years ago on July 31st, my birthday...* It was incredible to say the least that the heir's of the two founders; Harry Potter and Tom Riddle were locked in the same war to the death now, a thousand years later. With a small understanding of the enormity of it all, Harry returned to the book.

It is believed by some scholars in the Art that Gryffindor possessed such a rare talent in this field for the one task of defeating Salazar Slytherin, the talent has not returned in the past thousand years and experts say it is unlikely to. Some also believe in the theory of pure light magic, and it was this pure magic that led Gryffindor to victory at the battlefield of Stonehenge. This author must stress that the theory of 'pure magic' has never been proven, and is unlikely to be.

Harry stopped again, it was all too real. His abilities were that of Gryffindor's. It had taken a thousand years and a new Dark Lord for them to return, but they had. Fate had given him the power to defeat Voldemort, the strongest Dark Lord ever, and it appeared that Gryffindor had also possessed the power, and it had robbed him of everyone he loved. Harry shivered at the thought, could he lose everyone to defeat Voldemort? No he answered instantly. *The cost would be too high....*

While pure magic remains a fantasy, the fact still remains that Gryffindor possessed god-like abilities too match Slytherin with power that fateful night a millennia ago. That generation, and every generation since, owes their freedom and way of life to Godric Gryffindor.

Gryffindor did not return for seventy years after his defeat of Slytherin. When he did, he returned to the only place that he had ever called home, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. He was honoured beyond comprehension and revered by the world. Upon his return Gryffindor

also brought with him a Muggle bride. One, Marietta Meraux Gryffindor, a French woman of noble birth, whom Gryffindor spent his seventy year absence with.

It is unknown why Gryffindor returned to the world where he was a hero, after seventy years. At the time he was questioned by the only other surviving founder of the school, Helga Hufflepuff. In response to her question Gryffindor was quoted to say:

"Future millennia will require my blade to remain sharp. I will pass on the line of Gryffindor, for when the evil shall return my power will be most needed. The world has only just had a taste of the horror of war. It has begun."

Harry finished reading and fell into deep thought for a moment before closing the book with a snap, and placing it onto the wooden table next to him.

One Hour Earlier

Rafe Apparated. The protean charm that came with the Dark Mark making sure he went to the right location. His immediate surroundings were that of darkness. An impenetrable darkness on all sides, blinding his eyes, dulling his senses. It was suffocating, relentless, and what's more he wasn't alone....

Ethan held his breath as an emotion spread through him he rarely felt. Fear.... He was finally here. The Dark Lord was close. Rafe felt the small tingle on the back of his neck as Anti-Apparation wards were placed around the area. Ethan couldn't tell, but they still allowed people to Apparate in, just not out.

There were several pops in the darkness as more and more servants to the master arrived. Ethan greatly doubted that anyone could see him. Pop after pop, he counted at least six dozen before giving up. He remained fixed to the spot where he stood, and just managed to keep his mouth shut when he felt someone brush past him.

It was then that a realisation dawned on Ethan. He wasn't wearing Death

Eater robes... he would be picked out of the crowd instantly when the lights came on. *Shit* he thought. *Of all the things to forget....* He concentrated as hard as he could and withdrew his wand, and then whispered the transfiguration spell. Almost instantly he felt his Muggle clothes transfigure into a long sweeping pair of black robes, complete with hood and mask.

Ethan breathed a sigh of relief, but it was short lived. No sooner was his hood up, than the room exploded in a light of dark green flames. Torches that lined the once invisible walls sprang to life with such ferocity that Rafe was momentarily dazzled by their brightness. After a moment, though, his eyes adjusted to the light and what he beheld made him wish it was still dark.

Despite what he could ever have imagined, or guessed from Potter's description, the Dark Lord was the vision of his worst nightmares come to life. To Ethan it looked like Death himself. He was horrendous, he was hideous, he scared the living shit out of him. Rafe no longer held any confusion as to why people feared to look upon this monster. Cold, piercing, pitiless red eyes swept the room from a throne raised on a wooden dais barely ten metres away from where Ethan now stood. If he could, Ethan would have given anything to be able to look away, but he couldn't. He stared at the Dark Lord with a fear felt only by those who stare into the face of their own mortality.

It was just then that Ethan realised that every other Death Eater in the room was getting to their knees in a bow to their master. Now that he looked, this room was huge. Clearly twice the size of the Great Hall at Hogwarts, and everything was bathed in a green light from the torches on the wall. Not wanting to be noticed, Ethan knelt to the floor just like the rest of them.

It took a few minutes for the several hundred Death Eater's in the room to all get to their knees, and it wasn't until they were before Voldemort spoke.

"Welcome...." he hissed and Ethan shivered in spite of himself. "... to my new home. I trust everybody is here?"

Ethan glanced up slightly and into the face of the Dark Lord. He was

scanning the crowds adamantly, as if knowing each Death Eater by the way he bowed. If Ethan had known how close his guess was, he may have tried to escape. Voldemort surveyed the crowds for several moments before his face became as hard as ice.

"There is one too many here...." he whispered in his venomous voice. It travelled to every corner of the room. "Who dares to come before Lord Voldemort unmarked?"

Ethan was stunned now more than scared. Voldemort had known there was an extra person in the room, him. He had seemingly counted his minions, all three hundred or so, and known the exact number as one too many.

"Who dares to come before the Dark Lord unmarked?" bellowed Voldemort, causing most in the room to recoil in fear.

Ethan, now it had come to it, was no longer scared. He was determined. With a courage surpassing anything he'd ever known, Rafe stood up and glared at Voldemort through his mask.

There was scattered whispering through the crowd as he stood, and a snake like grin spread across Voldemort's face. "Foolish..." he whispered and then began to laugh.

Yeah laugh... laugh you old bastard.... thought Rafe.

"Reveal yourself," cried Voldemort once his insane cackle had ended. Ethan paused for a moment, every eye in the room upon him, and then he thought; why not? He would certainly have surprise up his sleeve.

With a quick flick of his wand, Ethan changed his clothes back to their original form. He was now dressed wearing a long sleeved t-shirt and black jeans. His face was visible for the whole room to see. Ethan didn't speak now that he stared straight into the face of evil.

"Who are you, Boy?" demanded Voldemort, confusion in his voice. "Why do you seek death?"

Ethan hesitated for a moment, it was then he felt a stabbing in his mind, an invasion. Quick to counter, Rafe raised his mental defences from his

short knowledge on Occlumency. It wasn't enough to keep Voldemort out for longer than a minute, but it would do.

"Who are you?" repeated Voldemort, his wand now pointed at Ethan, they were roughly ten metres apart.

Ethan smiled, he smiled sadly. "You don't recognise me?"

"Should I?" hissed the Dark Lord.

"No... you probably wouldn't know me," said Rafe, tightening his already vice like grip on his wand.

"You're trying my patience, boy. How did you arrive at this place? Only the loyal, marked, Death Eaters can reach this place...."

Ethan was aware of the immense silence in the room. This obviously hadn't happened before... With more than a little fear and anxiousness, Ethan continued, strengthening his mental shields as best he could so as to remain in eye contact with Voldemort. "I am marked, Voldemort," he whispered, pulling back the sleeve on his shirt and raising his Dark Mark for the whole world to see.

It was only then that he let his mental shields down, and his memories became Voldemort's. A look of what had to be surprise passed across the Dark Lord's face as realisation hit him. Rafe smiled a grim smile. "What's the matter, Dad? You forget about me?"

Harry sat silently in his armchair, thinking about all he had learned from the wandless magic book. *It was incredible* he thought. *Absolutely amazing the way magic works. Gryffindor knew that Slytherin's heir would carry on his war, and that his heir would have to fight him.* Harry breathed in heavily and shook his head. So many impossible things had happened to him that this shouldn't come as a surprise. He looked at his watch and discovered it had just gone quarter past one.

Hermione and Ron were still on the sofa, reading the same book, Mr. Granger was still watching the telly, and from the smell and the sound of things Mrs. Granger and Grandma Granger were still in the kitchen.

Harry smiled at the feeling of happiness in the room. *For all the darkness in the world, it was Christmas* he thought. *And it should be celebrated.* His good thoughts didn't last though as his scar burst with pain and he let out a small cry, his hand instinctively flipping to his forehead. Harry clenched his jaw and did his best to stifle the pain, but it was no use. Someone somewhere was experiencing the Cruciatus curse, and his scar was burning along with them.

"What is it, Harry?" asked Mr. Granger who had looked up when he cried. Harry ignored him, the pain was blinding.

"It's his scar," said Ron and Hermione in unison, rushing over to the chair, Hermione grasping his left hand whilst Mr. Granger walked over quickly in confusion.

"What's happening, Harry?" asked Ron.

Then pain started to subside and Harry began to breathe heavily. "Argh... Cruciatus, Voldemort's torturing someone...."

"Did you see who?"

Harry shook his head. "No... I only felt the pain of the curse...."

Ron and Hermione each glanced at each other and both had a look of utter helplessness on their faces. There was nothing they could do but be there for Harry. "What's happening?" asked a very concerned looking Mr. Granger. "Harry, your scar is bleeding."

Harry sighed and cursed under his breath as he felt the familiar trickle of blood down his right eyelid. He leaned across the chair and grabbed a tissue from the box on the coffee table; he then placed it against his slightly burning scar. "Can someone please tell me what's going on?" asked Mr. Granger again.

"It's *him*," whispered Harry in a strained voice as another, painful stab ripped across his scar. "Voldemort, I can feel the magic he's using." Just like so many times before Harry didn't know how he knew this, but he knew it was true. "And he's using a particularly painful curse..."

Mr. Granger looked confused, then scared, then worried. "Shou- Should

we get you to a doctor?"

"No," whispered Hermione sadly. "It'll pass, it always does...."

Ten Minutes Earlier

It was only then that he let his mental shields down, and his memories became Voldemort's. A look of what had to be surprise passed across the Dark Lord's face as realisation hit him. Rafe smiled a grim smile. "What's the matter, Dad? You forget about me?"

The Death Eaters in the room for the moment forget their place, and there was scattered muttering and whispering. Rafe hardly noticed it though, as he stared deep into the eyes of his father, and his father stared unblinkingly right back at him.

"You're dead?" Voldemort hissed in his snake like voice.

Rafe showed no emotion upon his face, and his mental Occlumency shields were back in place, if only for a few minutes. "So were you...."

Silence reined in the room. That was until another Death Eater stood. This one had a black mask, which meant that they were a member of the inner circle. "Master, does this boy speak the truth?"

"He does indeed," answered Voldemort, never taking his eyes off Ethan. "Return to your place, Bella...."

The masked Death Eater knelt back down in her place, and the rest of the room waited with baited breath for someone to speak, and make sense of this mess. "Why return now, Boy?"

Ethan still didn't show any emotion. His face was as hard as ice, as were his eyes. He still held his wand tightly in his hand. "To put an end to the death?"

A look of confusion passed across the Dark Lord's face as he took in what Ethan had said. It was only then that Ethan showed some emotion. His eyes burned with a fire of hatred for the demon before him, his father. The murderer and fear of the wizarding world for decades. Responsible

for thousands of deaths, the Diagon Alley massacre... all of it. So many ruined lives all brought back to this monster. He would know justice.

Rafe cried in anger, wanting to hurt his father... no, not his father. He had no father. His father died that fateful Halloween night in 1981. Not even blood connected him to the monster, his blood was Potter's. He and Harry shared a deeper connection. Rafe cried out again for the dead, and the fury took him. "AVADA KEDAVRA," he cried.

The jet of the curse burst out of his wand in a flash of green fire and sparks. It rocketed through the air and Rafe felt more powerful than he ever had in his entire life. The killing curse flew towards Lord Voldemort. It was closing the distance between them almost instantly.... almost.

As a collective gasp rose from the assembled Death Eaters, Voldemort side stepped the curse with a deadly speed, almost without any effort. The green jet of killing light shot past the Dark Lord and into his 'throne' behind him. The throne exploded in green flames and was reduced to ash in less than a second.

Ethan quick to get over his first miss raised his wand for another attack. But it was no good. Three hundred Death Eater's were on their feet in an instant, and drew their wands upon him. As did the Dark Lord, and Ethan stopped raising his arm halfway up, his wand hanging precariously from his fingers.

"Drop it, Boy," whispered Voldemort evilly. Ethan hesitated, glancing at the numbers behind, in front, and to either side of him... he complied. Voldemort smiled. "I think it is clear where your loyalties lie...."

"FUCK YOU," shouted Rafe, raising his hand and giving Voldemort the finger. Several of the Death Eater's growled menacingly as he said and did this.

Voldemort laughed his insane cackle. It cut through Ethan like a knife. "You've chosen today to die. For a brief moment there I had hoped you would join me... but no matter. You are a disgrace to my blood...." he spat, raising his wand.

Despite it all Ethan smiled now. Faced with Death and he smiled. *It is our*

choices that make us who we are.... "We both know it's not Riddle blood that flow's through your veins. It is his... and he will succeed where I've now failed. You will be held accountable for all the murder. You will know Death. Potter-"

"CRUCIO," cried an enraged Voldemort. Ethan collapsed instantly as ever nerve in his body exploded with unbelievable pain. It burned to his very soul, ripping his nerve endings from their connections, tearing the flesh... He cried out but wasn't aware of doing so. His entire world was pain, and would forever be pain. He couldn't remember any other emotion but this one, as his mind slipped further and further away.

And four hundred miles away, Harry Potter burned along with him.....

Mr. Granger looked confused, then scared, then worried. "Shou- Should we get you to a doctor?"

"No," whispered Hermione sadly. "It'll pass, it always does...."

Mr. Granger went and got a glass of water from the kitchen. When he returned Harry gulped it down gratefully. "Thanks," he croaked, his throat sore.

"Are you sure you didn't see anything?" asked Ron.

"No.... just the pain. Someone's angered him."

Hermione had begun to bite her nails, as she always did when she was nervous. "Do you think we should tell somebody?"

"Who?" asked Harry. "No one knows where he is? It would be pointless..."

"I think I'd like to know what's going on?" asked Mr. Granger, his voice slightly raised.

Harry sighed and winced slightly as a quick stab of pain ripped across his forehead. *Whoever it is is still being punished* he thought. "I told you about destroying Voldemort as a baby" said Harry and Mr. Granger nodded. "Well... because of that and a -err- combination of other...

things, I sometimes feel his emotions or see him."

Mr. Granger went slightly pale. "This is beyond me..." he whispered. "Will you be okay?"

"I will..."

Hermione and Ron exchanged a nervous, worried glance. It was Hermione that spoke first. "Maybe... maybe you should go get some rest before dinner...."

Harry looked at her and then at Ron and finally Mr. Granger in turn. "Yeah... yeah. I think I'll do just that."

Harry stood but swayed on his feet and both Ron and Mr. Granger jumped forward and grabbed one of his arms. "We'll see you up the stairs, Harry," nodded Mr. Granger.

So Harry half walked and was half carried up the stairs to his room. For some reason this attack had really sapped all his strength. The blood from his scar had hardened now, stopping the flow so Harry pocketed the tissue as they reached the room.

Thirty seconds later and Harry was on the bed, relaxing from the pain. Mr. Granger, Hermione, and Ron told him to call if he needed anything and then left him to the much needed quiet. Harry sighed heavily into his pillow and grit his teeth as his scar burned anew. It wasn't as painful as before, which meant a lesser curse than Cruciatus was being used for torture. He found himself hoping that it was a Death Eater who had earned this pain, and not someone innocent or from the Order.

These dark thoughts took Harry all the way into a restless sleep, where he didn't dream.

It was a good few hours before Harry awoke again to the world. The first thing he noticed was the dry, sickly feeling in the back of his throat, the other was the continued burning of his scar. Now that he thought about it, he hadn't really slept a lot over the past few hours. He remembered waking up every now and again but falling back to sleep almost instantly.

Harry coughed to clear his throat and rolled off the edge of the bed. He

swayed unsteadily for a moment before his eyes focused. His watch told him it was five thirty. He sighed... *This has been a good Christmas* he thought, *but it's a shame I slept through half of it.*

Harry made his way down the stairs. About halfway down the stairs the smell of Christmas dinner assaulted his senses, and it made him feel suddenly hungry. It had been about a day or so since he'd eaten anything, and was in much need of food.

"Harry?" said a familiar voice from the living room entrance.

"Hey, Ron," he whispered, easing himself down the final few stairs.

"You okay now?" asked Ron in an anxious voice.

Harry sighed as his scar continued to burn slightly. It wasn't overly painful, but it was annoying. "Yeah, slept it away. I'm good now," he answered slightly untruthfully.

Ron seemed convinced. "That's good. I was just coming up to get you actually, dinner's almost ready."

Harry smiled. "Great. I'm starving."

Harry followed Ron back into the living room, which was empty, and then through the side door and into the festively decorated dining room.

Hermione and Mr. Granger were already seated at the table, and Harry and Ron each took a seat across the left hand side of the table. Harry next to Ron, who was next to Hermione. As the conversation between the other three wheeled around him, Harry had a look around the room. Tinsel was draped across practically everything; from the curtains to the back of the chairs. Candles were dotted around the room which were the only source of light. The burned slowly, casting dancing shadows across the walls and ceiling. Harry watched them dance, and all the while his scar still burned.

"Argh..." cried Rafe for what felt like the millionth time as the Cruciatus curse connected him with Voldemort's wand. Rafe had trapped himself

within his own mind, keeping what he knew to be his self deep away from the pain. But it still hurt.

Ethan could no longer remember how long he'd been here, alone with the darkness and at the mercy of a demon. It felt like an eternity stretched past forever. In fact time no longer had any meaning; only the pain pierced his almost ruined consciousness.

Though he had been fighting it. Fighting the questioning probe that searched through his head for answers buried deeper than the spike of pain itself. One small part of him hid the information that could be harmful if known... but his Occlumency wasn't the best, and he had endured several hours of mind numbing torture and pain.

The part of Ethan that still knew right from wrong cried out when finally the weak shields fell, and Voldemort gained access to his hidden information.

Rafe barely heard the insane laughter as his ears were clogged with dried blood, but he managed to catch a few of the words that his 'father' spoke.

"A stronger will and mind than most, Boy, but in the end you fell to Lord Voldemort, as all do" There was that evil laughter again. "And now I see something of interest... so Potter is spending his holiday with the Mudblood. This is perfect. You have failed your hero, *Ethan!*"

In the part of his mind that still felt, Ethan began to feel an enormous sense of despair. *Harry...* he thought as the pain returned. *I'm sorry, Harry....*

Harry was hard put to it to hide the constant stinging in his scar as dinner progressed. Even though he was very hungry, he had hardly touched the food in front of him. And it did look good. Mrs. Granger had really cooked up a feast that even a house elf would envy. She sat opposite Harry now, and was smiling as she sipped her wine and the conversation progressed.

Harry hadn't contributed much to the conversation, the burning making

him feel too tired. But he noticed that Grandma Granger, who sat at the head of the table to his right, wasn't talking much either, but was almost constantly staring at him. Harry was slightly unnerved under her piercing glare, but he pretended not to notice.

After picking half heartedly at the turkey on his plate so as not to appear rude, Harry sighed heavily and wished with every fibre of his being that the pain would stop. It had never burned this fiercely, or for so long. And he only felt the pain, nothing more. No visions or emotions.

"Are you okay, Harry" asked Mrs. Granger at one point during the meal.

"Hmm... Yeah, yeah I'm fine. The food is really good, by the way."

Mrs. Granger smiled. "Thank you."

"You have really out done yourself this year, dear," commented Brian Granger.

"Well I wanted it to be special since we have Hermione home this year, and her friends as well," she finished with a warm glance at Ron and Harry.

"I've missed Christmas here," said Hermione.

"And we've missed having you, dear," agreed Mrs. Granger.

Harry zoned out of the talk but was still aware of Grandma Granger watching him out of the corner of his eye. The pain was coming in short bursts now, relenting for a few minutes before burning up again, he was sure his scar must appear flame red, but no one at the table mentioned it.

There was a clawing at his feet and Harry looked under the table to see that damn cat again. It had been following him around ever since its arrival with Grandma Granger yesterday and never missed an opportunity to claw at his feet. The cat had an obsession with toes.

"Cracker, Harry?"

Harry jumped out of his thoughts. "Sorry?" he asked turning to Ron who was holding a Christmas cracker. "Oh! Cracker."

Ron laughed and Harry grabbed the other end of the red festive cracker. CRACK! The cracker snapped and Harry and Ron each fell slightly back. More of the cracker was in Harry's hand, he'd pulled it enough and had won.

Harry smiled as he poured the contents onto the table in front of him. There was the customary cracker hat, a small plastic elephant, and a piece of paper with a joke on it.

"You have to put the hat on, Harry," said Hermione happily. She and Ron were already sporting their paper hats, and Mr. and Mrs. Granger were in the process of cracker pulling. Harry obliged.

CRACK! Mr. Granger's cracker went off. "What's the joke in yours, Harry?" asked Mrs. Granger when her husband had adorned his hat.

Harry picked up the small slip of paper and read it to himself quickly, before groaning at how stupid it was. He shook his head and laughed. "What nationality is Santa Claus?" He paused for a moment. "North Polish..."

There were many more groans and a few small giggles at this and Harry tossed the paper aside. For that moment he had forgotten about his scar pain, but now it came back in full force and he winced slightly as it returned. It was no longer burning, but was now more of a dull throb, like that of a really bad headache. He sighed for what felt like the thousandth time that night and took a sip of his sparkling champagne.

Dinner gave way to dessert, which was a very delicious Christmas pudding. Harry found space for it and was soon sitting back at the table with his hands on his stomach, content. A look at his watch told him it had just gone seven. *It had been a different sort of Christmas* he thought. Not as merry as he had envisioned it, but good none the less. Despite the scar pain it had been good.

After the plates and trays had been cleaned away, the whole family plus Ron and Harry moved into the warm living room. Harry placed himself in the soft chair by the large ornamental fireplace and rested his eyes slightly. When he glanced at the fireplace he recalled the floo powder that Dumbledore had given him: *just in case...* He was glad it hadn't

been needed.

Harry looked calmly around the room and saw Mr. Granger explaining the finer points of football to Ron, with the help of a video of course. Hermione, her mother, and Grandma Granger were all talking on the sofa by the Christmas tree. His scar was not relenting anymore and the headache, if it were possible, had worsened; with everyone distracted, Harry took this opportunity to sneak out to the kitchen unnoticed.

Once in the kitchen Harry passed by all the pots and pans that had been used that day and walked briskly over to the back door and opened it onto the world. Harry stepped out onto the back porch. The cold air outside was very refreshing and much needed. Harry felt his head clear slightly as he breathed in the fresh air deeply, along with several snowflakes.

It wasn't snowing that much, but the night sky was heavy with snowflakes and Harry watched them fall gracefully to earth as he stood with his arms resting on the wooden barrier that prevented a fall off the porch and into the garden.

It was calming out here in the garden. Everything was peacefully quiet and Harry didn't really feel the cold as his hair slowly filled with small dots of snow. He stood there wondering about the victim who had been tortured relentlessly today. It had been about seven hours since his scar had started burning and it hadn't stopped since, though it had lessened in that time and now even further in the clearness of the night air.

Despite this being a heavily populated area, Harry couldn't help but marvel at the quietness of the world around him. There was not a single noise anywhere, no animals, cars, or even wind pierced the quietness of the night. Harry loved it. He felt that were he to shout into the darkness it would carry for miles.

After a few minutes something did get his attention, though. There was a swoosh and a loud screech broke the quietness of the world around Harry. On instinct Harry thought for his wand and an instant later his new wand holster had pushed it up into his hand.

Harry relaxed, though, when a familiar owl landed gracefully on his

shoulder. It was the Weasley's owl Errol, and he was carrying a small envelope. Harry removed the envelope and thanked the owl. Errol hooted appreciatively but didn't take flight just yet. The bird was old; it was recuperating from its flight on his shoulder.

Harry smiled and stroked the owl's neck for a moment before returning to the letter. It was a simple envelope and his name was on the front in a plain black ink. He vaguely knew the handwriting as familiar. The letter itself was too heavy to be just paper, there was something else in the envelope, something metallic.

Harry broke the small red wax seal and first removed the parchment form within.

Dear Harry,

Thank you so much. Your gift was perfect... I wish I could have thought of something that is as thoughtful for you. Anyway I bought this that day in Hogsmeade. To be honest I didn't have the courage to send it until I opened the journal from you. Thank you again, Harry.

~Love Ginny

Harry smiled and re-read the letter several times before folding it and placing it in his pocket. *Love Ginny* he thought... With Errol still on his shoulder, and the snow still falling slowly through the quiet, calm night, Harry tipped the envelope upside down and let fall the gift inside onto his palm.

It was a ring. Harry picked it up off his palm with his other hand and inspected it closely with a warm smile. He saw the hallmark on the inside of the band that denoted it was real silver. It was very shiny and clear, and there was a pattern around the band of a repetitive curling wave, like the rise and fall of the ocean.

Harry smiled again and thought of Ginny as he placed the ring on the index finger of his right hand. It looked good he thought as light from the kitchen behind him caused it to sparkle and reflect the flakes of snow that swirled across the night. It wasn't until Harry looked properly into the ring, that he realised he wasn't alone.

As quick as a flash Harry whirled around and came face to face with Grandma Granger. He realised several things in quick succession; One: Errol was still on his shoulder, Two: he had his wand holster visible complete with wand, and three: she didn't seem shocked by any of this.

"I saw you from the kitchen, dear," she said with a calm, warm, knowing smile.

Harry was deeply confused. "I -err-... what?"

She continued to smile warmly and then reached out to stroke Errol. "No need to worry, dear. I know all about your world and magic."

Harry didn't think his confusion could increase, but it did. "How? You're a Muggle."

Grandma Granger shook her head slightly and smiled once more as Errol, now rested, took flight. "No I'm not, though I'm not a witch either..."

Harry thought for a moment. *If she's not a Muggle, and she's not a witch? Then she must be...* "You're a squib?" asked Harry.

Grandma Granger nodded appreciatively. "You're a fast one. My parents were magical, I wasn't."

"And you live in the wizarding world?" asked Harry, who had gotten over the initial shock of it all.

Her old face dropped a little. "No... I haven't had contact with that world for fifteen years."

"Why?" asked Harry.

She smiled once more. "Because of you."

Harry stepped back, his brow furrowed in confusion. "Me? I would have only been a year old at...." Harry trailed away as he realised what Grandma Granger was saying.

"Fifteen years ago I was already living the life of a Muggle. Twenty years ago my parents were killed by You-Know-Who-"

"Voldemort," cut in Harry.

Grandma Granger winced at his name, even after fifteen years. "Yes, by him. I was forty when they died and was married to a Muggle. I never told my husband about that world, and after my parents death I never went back to it. Me and my husband had a son, Brian, he was just out of college when they died and also didn't now about magic. So I just left... there was nothing keeping me there and the Muggle world was a lot less cruel."

"But you said you left it when I was one?" asked Harry.

"No I didn't. I said I left it twenty years ago, I cut off all contact to it fifteen years ago," she said with a strong note in her voice. "You see, I still received an issue of the *Prophet* everyday. And everyday there would be more and more deaths caused by *him* and his Death Eater's. Except one day.... Sunday November 1st, 1981. The day the world knew peace; my copy of the *Prophet* arrived. The story, You-Know-Who was dead, and you had done it, you were the Boy Who Lived, gaining nothing more than a lightning bolt shaped scar on your forehead for the trouble."

Harry turned away and went back to leaning against the rail, watching the snow. He realised that his scar was no longer hurting. "And?"

"And after reading that I had a sense of closure. He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was dead; my parent's death had seen justice and I no longer had any reason to keep in touch with that world."

Harry sighed and turned around to face the elderly squib. "He's back now, you know...."

She nodded grimly. "Yes... I know. I saw enough of you and your scar today to figure that out."

Harry nodded but then a thought came to him. "Does your son, Brian, know that you know about the wizarding world?"

Grandma Granger shook her head. "No, and please don't tell him or anyone else. I've lived the last thirty years as a Muggle and plan to keep doing so. I have no patience for the world where *he* lives."

Harry nodded again. "I won't tell anyone..."

"Thank you, dear. Humbug?"

Harry smiled as the small white paper bag of liquorice humbugs was offered again. "Thanks," he said taking one and placing it in his mouth.

"It's cold out here," she said after a moment. "Let's go back inside before we're missed, dear."

Harry took a final look at the snow covered landscape and turned around with a nod. If Grandma Granger wanted her past to remain a secret and she had told him, then Harry wouldn't break that confidence. As he walked back into the kitchen behind her she spoke once more.

"I've taken my subscription to the *Prophet* out again, Harry. I hope one day to see the same news I saw those fifteen years ago...."

Harry didn't say anything to this but just nodded his head ever so slightly and went back into the living room to rejoin his friends, a thousand and one new thoughts and questions rolling around in his head... and his scar burning anew.

Chapter 16 - War

I am become Death, shatterer of worlds.

*--J. Robert Oppenheimer upon witnessing
the explosion of the first atomic bomb*

Harry awoke to a thin ray of sunlight obscuring his vision. Across the room a slit in the curtains was letting the early morning sunlight pour into the room in a defined line that rested over his face.

For a moment he lay there blinking in the pale morning light as he struggled to recall his dreams. All Harry could remember was an extreme darkness that was pierced by a bright golden thread. It was

gone. With an early morning sigh, Harry rolled over and hopped out of bed, cracking a few joints as he went.

The clock on the wall told him it was twenty five past eight as he passed it and went into the bathroom. At the sink Harry splashed his face with cold water and felt immediately refreshed and fully awake for doing so. He stared at his scar in the mirror and gently ran a finger across it. Small flakes of dried blood were chipped away and fell into the sink. Harry winced as this happened and all the memories of yesterday were... remembered.

Who had angered Voldemort so much? And are the dead now? he thought. *Grandma Granger's a squib... not overly surprising. Why had my scar burned for hours on end? Why isn't it now?* As Harry thought, and all these questions clouded his mind, he twirled the ring on his finger from Ginny, felt the cool silver on his skin and he smiled. It was a really nice piece, and Harry liked it all the more because it had come from such a close friend.

After a shower and a change of clothes, Harry exited the bathroom to find Ron still dead to the world. He smiled; Ron and Hermione had stayed up long into the Christmas night. Harry had gone to bed out of sheer exhaustion just before ten thirty.

Downstairs Harry entered the kitchen to find Mr. and Mrs. Granger, Hermione, and Grandma Granger all seated at the table.

"Morning, Harry," they all said one after the other.

"Good morning," yawned Harry, taking a seat at the table.

"Juice?" asked Hermione, holding up a jug of orange juice.

"Yes, please," Harry said, and passed her a glass that was at his place in front of him.

"You feeling any better, Harry?" asked Mrs. Granger.

Harry stared at her for a moment. "What?"

She smiled knowingly. "It was fairly obvious last night that you weren't at

your best. You looked very... unwell."

"Oh! Yeah, yeah I'm fine now. Just felt a bit off last night."

Mrs. Granger nodded and Hermione smiled sadly, but encouragingly at him. Grandma Granger, the squib turned Muggle, just nodded. "So... what are we all up to today?" asked Harry as he took some toast from the rack.

"Well I'm driving, Mum, to the station at ten thirty, and then me and Janet have to be at the practice until late, so its work all day for us," sighed Mr. Granger, rubbing his eyes with his hand.

"We can go to the station to see Grandma off," said Hermione, "but we'll have to catch the bus home. Mum and Dad will be late if they have to drop us back here."

Harry nodded and drank his orange juice in two quick gulps. "Someone's going to have to go slap Ron then. Otherwise he won't be up before sunset."

There were a few laughs at this and Hermione smiled and rose from her chair. "I'll get him up," she said, leaving the kitchen.

Pain. The entire world is pain, and is born of pain; it is with pain that we are born into death. Nothing is real but pain. I hold my breath, and I wish for death.

"An interesting knife," hissed the Dark Lord and Rafe snapped his eyes open. "The runes on the blade have some meaning to you, Boy? They say nothing...."

Ethan saw darkly through the haze that fell before his eyes. Voldemort had removed his dagger from his pocket. Rafe made some struggle to move, that blade was special to him. He'd had it six years.

He wasn't sure when it actually happened, but suddenly Voldemort was leaning over him, and Rafe felt his breath on his cheek... it was cold, deadly so. He shivered. "It ends today, Boy. Potter will know pain as you

have...."

With a quick flick of his wrist Voldemort brought the blade up to Rafe's forehead. Ethan barely felt it as the dagger pierced his skin. It was little pain compared to what he had had to endure the past... he wasn't sure how much time had passed? From what Voldemort said it couldn't have been more than a day, but that couldn't be right? It felt like a lifetime, a lifetime of pain.

"You have failed your master, your father, Boy... And death is your reward...."

Without hesitation and with a sadistic pleasure, Rafe watched helplessly as Voldemort raised his dagger above his head. It seemed to happen in slow motion, the blade falling inch by slow inch. In reality it was less than a second before the blade came crashing down and the point ripped into Rafe's skin, just below his ribs. Voldemort plunged the dagger into his skin effortlessly, without a hint of emotion. It went in deep before Voldemort stopped and Ethan coughed up a mouthful of blood.

The last thing he heard, before unconsciousness claimed him, was that evil laughter ringing in his ears. The last thing he saw was Voldemort rise, and cast the dagger aside, his work done. And the last thing Ethan did, before the darkness claimed him... was use his last ounce of strength to move his left arm, the one that wasn't broken, over to the hilt of his dagger. Grasping it weakly, Ethan dragged his arm back over to his pocket, and placed the dagger inside....

One Hour Later

"Goodbye, Mum," said Brian Granger warmly, hugging his mother as her train prepared to make its way out of the busy Muggle platform.

Harry stood with Ron as the goodbyes were said. They were both getting over having to carry the heavy suitcases from the car to the train, and Ron was nursing a small cut the cat had given him through its basket.

"Goodbye, Brian," replied Grandma just as warmly. "And you, Janet. Thank you for Christmas, dear."

"You're welcome," she smiled returning the hug.

She then turned to Hermione. "Hermione, dear. It was nice to see you. That school of yours up North makes it hard to. I hope it won't be another five years between visits?"

Harry smiled as Hermione shook her head and wrapped her arms around her grandmother. "It won't be that long. I'll be home at Easter; do you think you could make it?"

"I'll try, Hermione," she said with a smile and then turned to the train. On the first step up she turned back to Ron and Harry. "It was nice meeting you, boys," she shouted slightly with a knowing sparkle in her eye as she looked at Harry. "Goodbye everyone," she cried finally as the whistle blew and the train began to slowly move out of the platform.

They stayed there until it was out of sight and then the three Grangers, plus Ron and Harry, turned away and headed back to the car. Harry followed the crowd through the busy station, dodging people who were passing here and there. At one point Harry turned around quickly, he had felt that someone's eyes were upon him. Just a tingling feeling on the back of his neck. He scanned the crowds and his search turned up no one suspicious, though Harry remained on his guard. After walking down the escalator the station gave way to the car park.

Once they reached the car there was a small discussion, in which it was decided that Mr. Granger would drive the three of them to Flinders Street, which was a few streets over from their building, and they could catch the right bus home from there.

The traffic on the roads was busy as Mr. Granger wound his Ford Mustang through the streets of Abingdon. The weather threatened snow again as Harry looked out of his window and up into the sky, but not for a while. Harry didn't know why, but as soon as the car turned onto Flinders Street, he felt unexplainably nervous.

Halfway up the street Mr. Granger pulled over to the side of the road and stopped the car. "This is the bus stop," he said, pointing to said bus stop. "We'll see you three later tonight," he ended.

"Goodbye, kids," added Mrs. Granger.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione said their goodbyes and stepped out of the car. With a final wave the car pulled away and continued on down the road until it turned a corner and was lost from sight.

The three of them moved over to the bus stop and Harry went over and checked the time table attached to the stop. "Ten minutes," he called to Ron and Hermione. "It is the 462, right?"

"Yep," nodded Hermione.

"Then ten minutes," finished Harry, walking back over to the bench and sitting down.

As Ron and Hermione talked happily and carefree. Harry watched the people who were moving up and down the very busy street suspiciously. He couldn't shake the nervous feeling he'd gotten as soon as he was on this street, and after all these years of fighting he'd learned to pay attention to his feelings. All he saw were the normal old brick buildings and crowds of busy people, all having something on their minds. It was, for all intents and purposes, a normal Muggle street.

"Where did you get that ring, Harry?" asked Ron five minutes later.

"Hmm... Oh! Oh.... Your -eh- your sister gave it to me?" he said nervously.

Hermione grinned but Ron appeared confused. "Ginny?"

"Of course, Ginny," answered Hermione, rolling her eyes.

Ron's brow furrowed in confusion. "But I thought she didn't like Harry anymore?"

Harry blushed slightly. "This doesn't mean she likes me, Ron," he said unconvincingly, but with a smile, "it was just a Christmas present."

Ron opened his mouth to reply but was stopped when Hermione jumped up because the bus had arrived. It turned off the busy street and came to a grinding halt before them. As usual, the automatic doors opened with a hiss.

"Come on, you," smiled Hermione, grasping Ron's hand and pulling him up the steps of the bus before he could say anything else to Harry.

Harry smiled, then laughed, and then finally shook his head. Ron really was a good friend. Before he walked up the steps, Harry pulled out his Muggle money bag from his pocket. He was just about to jump on to the bus when a passer-by nudged his back causing a few coins to slip out of the top and onto the icy ground. Harry cursed under his breath and motioned the bus driver to wait a minute as he picked them up. It didn't take him long. Harry made sure he had them all, as he needed them to pay his fare on, and walked forward. He only got his foot on to the first step before the world exploded....

It happened instantly, viciously, and unexpectedly. The building two doors down from the one directly behind Harry exploded in a ball of dark green flames. The initial shockwave sent Harry flying backwards *across* the length of the bus before dropping him hard at the rear of the vehicle. Small bits of plaster and debris from the explosion ripped his skin and were embedded in his face as the flames ripped out into the street. The explosion continued and Harry looked up from the ground to see several Muggles flying through the air from the pure force of the blast and some of them were engulfed by the green flames.

It only took another moment for the screams to start. The nearby pedestrians that had been knocked off their feet from the blast cried out in horror at this unexplained event. Harry had been winded when he landed, and was now struggling for breath and trying to get up as the cuts on and across his face began to bleed. He knew this was no accident.

The bus driver had some sense about him; as soon as the initial shock was over he slammed on the accelerator and began to drive away fast from the scene. Harry coughed and relaxed slightly when he realised his friends were escaping.

They arrived a moment later, as soon as Harry was on his feet. The pops and cracks signalled their arrival and Harry watched with a growing fear as Death Eater's in long black cloaks appeared up and down the street. With an angry groan, Harry flicked his wrist, and his wand was propelled

into his hand from its holster.

Most of the Muggles on the street stood in shock horror as the impossible happened right before their eyes. Apart from the green flames, people in dark cloaks were appearing out of nowhere. Harry, without a moment's hesitation, began running up the street to the nearest Death Eater and starting shouting for everybody else to run.

It was then that the real nightmare started. As a collective group the growing number of Death Eater's on the street raised their wands to the nearest Muggle and started shouting Unforgivable curses. Harry's stomach flipped as he saw a group of Death Eater's across the street slaughter three Muggles mercilessly. All of them enveloped needlessly in green light.

With an increased ferocity, he ran faster to meet the first Death Eater. The man turned just in time to take Harry's full weight in the chest. As Harry collided with him he heard several cracks that had to be ribs, and then the man cried out from beneath his mask. "I hope that hurt," shouted Harry angrily as he looked at a lifeless Muggle a few feet away, eyes wide with a dead surprise. This Death Eater was responsible. "Stupefy," said Harry as he got up, the man giving no fight.

Harry took a deep breath and assessed the situation as best he could in a few small seconds. What he saw was horrible. The once normal street of only a few minutes ago now resembled a battlefield. Several buildings and structures up and down the street were alight with green and red flames. And defenceless Muggles were running here and there, some straight into the light of the killing curse. The noise was almost deafening as cars crashed into one another, and curses crossed each other in mid air. And the screams, the screams were what Harry remembered the most.

The scene made him angry, very angry. In a few seconds Harry felt and saw the familiar tingle and small bolts of lightning on his skin that meant his emotion had released his power. It had been anger, of course, that had caused the reaction. But Harry wasn't complaining.

"Stupefy," he shouted, and a jet of enormous red light, more powerful than usual, burst out of his wand and rocketed across the road and into

the back of a Death Eater. The Death Eater was thrown into the air, and came down hard on the roof of a parked car.

Harry turned to look up the street as he heard the screech of tyres and fear once again took him. It was the bus. The bus that held his friends.... At the end of the street, roughly one hundred and fifty metres away, was a line of Death Eater's that prevented anyone or anything from leaving the street.

Harry cried out from where he stood as the Death Eater's, all two dozen or so of them, pointed their wands at the bus and shouted a levitation charm. The bus was instantly lifted off the ground and flew thirty feet up into the air.

Without even thinking, Harry ran towards the bus with all the speed he could muster. As he went he Stupefied two more Death Eater's and shouted to the Muggles to get themselves out of the way.

Ignoring the growing pain in his cheek from the shrapnel embedded there, Harry jumped onto and then over the bonnet of a crashed car, that was being licked by green flames from a near by alight shop. It took him ten seconds to reach the bus and then his common sense caught up with him. He couldn't stop twenty Death Eater's single handed, and he couldn't stop them from dropping the bus either.

They hadn't seen him yet as he was now hidden, crouched behind to a parked car. Harry watched the bus swirl in the air and heard the laughter from the men in masks down below. He could just make out the people on the bus up above as it tilted to its side and they were thrown roughly against the window. There was the sound of smashing glass up above and a person fell out from thirty feet as the bus was rotated three hundred and sixty degrees in the air.

Harry swore loudly as he watched this person fall, and then without really thinking about it, he raised his wand and took careful aim. "Wingardium Leviosa," he shouted and felt the familiar pull on his wand as his charm connected with an object. Harry let out a long held breath as he eased the woman, who had fallen, to the ground slowly.

She was safe, at the moment. But her survival had alerted the Death

Eater's to his position. Harry looked back up the battle ruined street briefly to see another building go up in flames, and several more Muggles get cut down by green light. But Harry had a bigger problem right now.

When it happened, it happened fast. It only took the Death Eater's levitating the bus a moment to realise who he was, and when they did every single one of them broke the connection their wands had with the bus, and pointed them at Harry.

It was an impossible decision. If he tried to catch the bus, which would be near impossible considering its size and weight, the Death eater's would surely kill him while he was occupied being the hero. If Harry fought the Death Eater's, then the bus would fall thirty feet to the ground, certainly killing everybody on board, and that included Ron and Hermione. In the end there was no real choice. He would die for his friends.

Harry ran out from behind the car and into the middle of the death filled road. He stood directly underneath where the bus would land and pointed his wand up towards it. Harry sighed as he heard the first curses of the Death Eater's begin to form on their lips, and raised his other hand. He briefly noticed the small crackles of lightning across its surface, and, if anyone could have told him, his eyes held the same crackles of power.

The bus was falling fast now and Harry barely shouted his charm before it was too late. "WINGARDIUM LEVIOSA!" he cried with every ounce of his being. The bus was four feet above his head, and about ten feet above the road, when it came to a sudden, floating stop. Harry's eyes widened at the sight of it. The bus had fallen on its side, so its occupants were pressed against the glass pane windows. Harry could see the terrified Muggles and he also saw Ron holding onto Hermione at the back, who wasn't moving. They were both pressed against the glass.

All of this happened in a single moment, though, and Harry collapsed to his knees almost instantly as the strength and magic required to levitate the bus on his own was tremendous. He panted heavily and it was now that the curses of the Death Eater's caught up with him.

Harry turned his head slightly and saw multiple beams of red light flying

towards him. *Odd* he thought *they're not trying to kill?* His thoughts were lost in an instant though as he realised these spells would surely break his connection with the bus. It was directly above him, and would crush him for sure if it fell. *At least they'll survive* he thought briefly. *They won't fall that far....*

Harry braced himself for death and closed his eyes against the coming curses. A few moments passed and nothing happened. Another few and then Harry opened his eyes. No curses had hit him. The shield, the blue shield created by his magic had taken each and every curse fired towards him and had absorbed it into its blue haze. He hadn't created the shield, nor had he thought of it, but it was there just the same.

Harry sighed heavily with relief and barely heard the Death Eater's shouts of anger and more futile attempts at firing curses, only to have the shield stop them. He didn't know how long the shield would last, and the bus was now really heavy on his arms. With a last effort he pulled his arms to the left and brought the bus over a clear patch of road. He lowered it slowly but it was still two feet off the ground when the effort became too much physically, and magically. His levitation charm broke and the bus fell the remaining two feet, Harry cringed as the windows smashed and the metal scraped across the ground, sending fiery sparks up into the air.

As soon as the weight of the bus was off his shoulders Harry felt his strength return almost instantly. He turned as the resounding clangs of curses kept hitting his shield. He saw the twenty four Death Eater's fire curse after curse, all non lethal ones, he was wanted alive, and get more and more frustrated as they did nothing.

Harry clenched his jaw and got to his feet quietly, his shield glowing blue as another curse hit it. He eyes flicked quickly to the bus, and then to the destruction of the street around him, all of the bodies of the innocent lying here and there, some burning in the green flames, leaving a sickly smell. And then Harry turned back to the two dozen Death Eater's. They-would-pay. If not for all the destruction up and down this street, then for trying to kill his friends. That was what blinded Harry now, anger. No, not anger, pure rage directed at the servants of Voldemort for threatening two of the few people he loved.

"You want a fight? You've got a fight," he shouted and took two quick steps forward. The Death Eater's were about fifteen metres away and laughed as Harry stepped forward to challenge them. *You won't be laughing long* he thought.

Harry ran, raising both his wand and his hand as he did so. "Incendio," he cried and a massive ball of flame burst from his wand and hand, combining into one. It hit a laughing Death Eater who wasn't quick enough to move. He was instantly burnt to a crisp from head to toe as the fire engulfed him, and his screams joined that of the innocent. He died quickly, as did the laughter of the other Death Eater's.

Harry's shield absorbed another fifteen stunner spells, but he could tell it was weakening. It wouldn't take much more of a pounding, but he would give them hell before the end. Harry cried out in rage as he spotted a Muggle child lying dead three feet away. *Innocent...* "Reducto!" he shouted and the red light burst through the smoky air and hit a Death Eater in the chest. He was instantly blown into a thousand unrecognisable pieces.

Another assault of spells and this time the shield flickered at the last and a burning curse broke through the blue haze. It hit Harry on the upper left shoulder and he winced, letting a cry escape his lips as his skin was burnt deeply. It was then that Harry realised that he couldn't stop all the Death Eater's before his shield fell... he couldn't win... but something told him to try anyway, to carry on the fight.

"Stupefy," he cried and another of the shieldless Death Eater's fell. Harry fired the stunning curse again but it missed. The words formed on his lips a third time, but just as he was about to say them, a strange feeling assaulted his senses and Harry paused halfway during the spell. A voice in his head whispered, *double the spell, triple it.*

Harry had no idea what this meant, but when he looked down at his wand he saw that the tip was glowing red. The voice in his head told him it was the stunning spell he had thought of a moment ago. *Double it, triple it, go even further....*

Harry understood what it meant. The spell, the Stupefy spell was sitting at the end of his wand, waiting to be fired. He didn't know how he knew?

But he realised that he could add another Stupefy to the end, increasing its power. So that is what he did. Harry concentrated, not really knowing what he was doing. All the sounds of battle, the smell of burning, and the sight of death was forgotten as Harry thought of adding another stunning spell to the one already on the tip of his wand. Beads of sweat appeared on his brow and Harry almost dropped his wand as the red light at the tip of the wand became brighter. There was the power of two spells there now. He did it again, only this time it came faster. The red light at the tip became even brighter and that was when Harry realised it.

"STUPEFY!" he shouted and felt the magic erupt from his wand. He stepped back slightly from the force of the spell as it shot through the air. It exploded near a group of eight Death Eater's and four of them were dropped instantly. The other Death Eater's turned to see four of their number drop, and some of them stepped back in fear. Uncertainty in their stance as they looked from the fallen, and then back to Harry, who was glowing with power, the fury evident in his eyes.

Meanwhile, Harry was already rebuilding that power. He didn't know how he knew this magic. Something in his mind had just... known it. Right now he didn't care; he'd worry about it later. It was just what he needed to thin out their numbers. They had begun to circle him now, but Harry did it faster this time. Building one stupefy spell on top of another. In fifteen seconds he had six at the end of his wand, and the light from it was so bright it was almost blinding. He pointed his wand into the thick of the Death Eater's and released the magic. As it exploded out of his wand Harry felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise at the sheer power. He was almost thrown back as the beam of ultra bright red light hit one of the Death Eater's sharply. He was instantly stunned for at least a week, and any Death Eater within ten metres of him fell as well. In one spell Harry had taken out ten of the Death Eater's. It had honestly scared him, that magic was on par with Dumbledore and Harry felt extremely weak for using it. *What's happening to me?* he thought...

His spell was it for the rest of them, though. Harry turned, anger and power lighting up his eyes. It was clear to the eight remaining Death Eater's that they wouldn't win a fight. Harry knew this, and what's more Harry didn't care. He heard the screams of dying Muggles on the streets,

the charred corpses of once innocent shoppers were all he saw. Ash and smoke were heavy in the air as he raised his wand at the fearful group of Death Eater's.

Harry felt his magic crackle over him like a second skin, and in the blink of an eye he called four more stunner spells to the tip of his wand. Without hesitation he let them loose on the retreating party of enemies. Two of them took the brunt of the spell, and the resounding shockwave knocked out another three in close proximity.

There were now only three Death Eater's, when five minutes ago there had been twenty four. They were on the floor and struggling to get up as the power of his spell had knocked them down.

Harry ran over to the closest one, some fifteen metres away on the ground who was struggling against the stunner that had almost hit them. He fell to his knees as he came level to the Death Eater and grabbed the scruff of robes around their neck. A brief glance up the road told him the other two Death Eater's had already gone, Disapparated. But that didn't matter, they would pay for their crimes eventually, right now Harry had his Death Eater.

He looked back down at the person he held roughly in his grasp. There was coughing coming from behind the white mask and Harry felt a moment of confusion, it sounded familiar, but he couldn't place it. He sighed angrily and let fall his wand into the holster. Without even a moment of hesitation, Harry grabbed the mask, and pulled it cruelly away from the face of the Death Eater.

The shock came instantly, but Harry got over it just as quick. This was someone he knew, someone he knew very well. "Hello, Umbridge," Harry said acidly, anger in his voice and not a hint of any other emotion.

Dolores Jane Umbridge was still reeling from the stunner spell, but Harry couldn't mistake the absolute hatred and venom that was in her eyes, directed right at him. For a brief moment he thought that his eyes probably looked the same.

With a cry of anger Harry stood up, and in so doing brought Umbridge up by the collar with him. He pushed her back against the underside of an

upturned car and removed his wand from its holster. With one hand still holding her against the car, and another now pointing his wand in her face, Harry saw Umbridge realise the hopelessness of the situation. She struggled slightly but Harry pushed her back effortlessly, his strength coming from his anger.

He now saw the hatred in her eyes turn to fear as she stared with her wide toad like face from the wand and then to Harry in turn. Harry took a deep breath and then with a few moments thought, called two Reductor curses to the tip of his wand. It glowed brightly across Umbridge's face, and she cried out slightly as Harry inched his wand closer. "Nice to see you again, *Professor*," Harry whispered but she heard it all and whimpered slightly at the unforgiving tone in his voice. "Oh, don't worry," continued Harry. "This," he shook his wand close to her face causing her to whimper again, "is just to make sure I have your complete attention."

Harry showed no emotion as he grasped her robes tighter and then stepped to the side and threw her roughly to the ground. He had absolutely no patience for Death Eater's, especially this one. Harry still kept his wand trained on her as she turned to look fearfully up at him from the ash covered road.

Harry spoke so forcefully next that anyone who heard it would've taken a step back at the feeling of power his words seemed to hold. "Go back to Voldemort," she whimpered again, "You go back and tell him. Tell him one day soon he will know the pain he has caused. Tell him I'm coming...." Harry turned away from the sight of Umbridge in front of him, he wondered briefly if she had cast any of the spells that had killed the Muggles that now littered the battle ridden street. "Go," he said with an edge in his voice. "Go, before I do something we'll both regret."

Umbridge didn't need telling twice. She was gone a second later with a loud crack and Harry didn't turn back to look at her. Instead he ran, he ran back over to the upturned bus that was beginning to smoke slightly from the heat of the flames that were licking its underside from a destroyed, smouldering building not far away. The survivors on board were climbing out, and some of the stronger braver ones were helping others out of the windows.

With a loud sigh Harry climbed onto the 'roof' of the bus, which was really the right hand side and looked down into it for Ron and Hermione. It was now that the exhaustion of his battle began to catch up to him. He hadn't realised it, but now that the adrenalin in his system was beginning to calm down, as was his magic, he was in quite a bit of pain. The pieces of shrapnel embedded in his face and exposed skin stung terribly. It hurt to move his left arm, as the burning curse had left his shoulder weak. He also felt just... tired.

Harry shook his head, though, now wasn't the time. His friends needed him. He came to a man who was also standing on the bus, and was trying to pull what must have been his wife out through the window. Without saying a word Harry jumped to the other side and grabbed her other arm. With a nod to the man, who saw his face and cringed, they lifted her up and out of the damaged bus.

Harry didn't wait, he barely heard the man's thanks before he began off again down the bus. He remembered seeing them at the back when he had levitated it down safely, and in three seconds he was there.

Ron and Hermione were there as well. At the 'bottom' of the bus lay Hermione, a nasty looking bump on her forehead, she wasn't moving.... And trying vainly to get her up was Ron, who was bleeding from a cut on his cheek. "RON!" he cried and his best friend looked up fearfully from inside the bus.

"Harry?" he said carefully as he took in all the blood on his friends face. "Harry, is that you?"

Harry didn't answer. Instead he moved one window over to the right and, without another moment's thought, stepped down heavily on the glass with his left foot. It shattered instantly and Harry was just about to jump down into the bus when he heard something above the destruction of the street.

Harry paused and didn't turn for a moment. "POTTER!" shouted a cold hard voice. Harry looked up from his kneeling position on top of the bus and a fresh wave of fury emanated from him.

About one hundred and fifty metres down the street stood two lone

Death Eater's. The only ones left on the street. One was robed and unidentifiable; the other Harry knew all too well. The two men were carrying something between them, and as Harry watched they threw it to the ground roughly. The robed man Disapparated and Harry shouted. "PETTIGREW!"

"It's not over, Harry," said the rat faced Peter Pettigrew and then with a final smug look he Disapparated. They had left whatever they had been carrying behind.

"Harry! Harry, help me. I can't get her up on my own." Harry only just heard Ron; he looked up the street to the bundle Pettigrew had left behind and something told him to go to it. He hesitated for a moment and then felt a hand on his shoulder. Harry wheeled around, wand in hand and... stopped. It was the man he had helped just a moment ago.

"Can I help you, son?" he asked in a strong Irish accent.

Harry looked down at his friends in the bus, to the bundle up the road, and then finally back to the man. "Please," he said. "Help my friends out of the bus...."

Without another word Harry jumped forward and off the end of the bus down to the hard road. He ran slightly up the destroyed street, another nervous feeling shrouding him as he drew closer to whatever Pettigrew had left.

Harry passed by body after mangled body, each one had the same look upon their face. They were frozen in fear. He coughed as he ran through a heavy cloud of smoke and ash and drew close to the prone form just up ahead. Harry slowed to a walk as he came upon the bundle. It took him a moment to realise it was a person; he couldn't see who because he was lying on his stomach with his face turned away.

Harry approached cautiously, his wand tight in his hand. He looked about the street around him quickly, making sure there were no enemies, that it wasn't a trap... and then Harry bent down and turned over the still form.

The person coughed as he turned and Harry let out a cry of surprise

mingled with fear and a thousand other emotions as he recognised the person beneath him. Harry fell to the ground as shock took hold. It wasn't possible... it was horrible... it was real.

"Ethan," croaked Harry, looking up and down Rafe's body slowly. He noticed at least a hundred dark bruises on all his exposed skin. His right arm was pointing at an odd angle and he was sure it was broken. From the short stabs of breathe coming from Rafe, Harry surmised that he had broken ribs. And from the way his foot hung, had a broken ankle as well. But that wasn't the worst of it.... Harry could see a deep stab wound across his stomach that had been bleeding heavily, and still was slightly. He recognised the symptoms of the Cruciatus curse as well, the rings under the eyes and the pale look his skin held. There was also one final wound... cut crudely into Ethan's forehead, about a quarter of an inch thick, was a lightning bolt shaped scar.

Harry almost threw up at the sight before him, almost. It was then that Rafe's eyes snapped open and he seemed to focus on the world around him. He looked around wildly for a moment before his gaze settled on Harry's. Harry looked down helplessly, it was obvious he was dying, he was almost unrecognisable.

"...Harry..." whispered Rafe his eyes focusing and blurring one after the other.

"It's me, Ethan," croaked Harry, tears in his eyes.

"Harry... I'm- I'm- I'm.... sorry...." Rafe said with some effort.

Harry didn't know why he was sorry but it didn't matter. "Don't be," he said as Rafe closed his eyes again. Harry jumped. "NO!" he shouted, pulling Ethan close to him and gentle slapping his cheek. "Stay awake, Rafe. We can get help-"

Ethan's eyes opened again and he coughed in what Harry thought may have been laughter. "No... Harry. Its over." He coughed again but this time he brought up some blood in doing so.

"Ethan... I-" Harry began.

"Don't... don't say it, Harry." Harry could tell that every word caused him

pain. "Don't say it. We've all got to die sometime..."

Harry had nothing to say to that. *What could anyone say to that?* He looked around helplessly for anything that could help him... there was nothing. "Did Voldemort do this, Ethan?"

Rafe's eyes opened and closed a few times. "Voldemort...? Yes. Ask Dumbledore, Harry, he'll tell you everything...."

"What are you talking about, Ethan?" asked Harry desperately.

Ethan's eyes flickered in and out of focus for a moment, and his mouth opened and closed slowly. He closed his eyes for a few minutes and Harry feared the worst, but then he opened them again and there was a fierce determination there.

"Harry... argh... Harry. Take this..." Ethan moved his left hand slowly down to his jeans pocket; it took him all his strength to weakly pull a dagger out of his pocket by the hilt. "This, Harry... take it."

Harry stared from Rafe, to the dagger. His eyes were as focused as they had ever been and Harry gently reached over and removed the dagger from his still hand. The blade was encrusted with dried blood and Harry didn't have to think hard as to who's, as his gaze lingered on the stab wound in Rafe's stomach.

He looked remorsefully back into Ethan's eyes. "Promise me, Harry. Promise...." Ethan raised his hand and grabbed the scruff of Harry's shirt around his neck. His breathing was coming in short desperate gasps now. He was at the end. "Take the blade... You have to... have to promise me, Harry. Promise me you'll send the Devil back to Hell. Promise me you'll defeat Voldemort...."

"Ethan... I-" Harry stopped as he saw the look in Rafe's eyes. This was a dying man's wish. "I... promise."

Ethan sighed and let his grasp on Harry's shirt go. His breathing was laboured now and coming more infrequently. Harry watched helplessly, as Ethan's blue eyes glazed over and all the life died within them.

He let fall a silent tear as the breathing stopped all together, and Ethan

Rafe died in the middle of this street of pain. Harry reached over and closed his eyes with a brush of his hand. A thousand thoughts whipping through his head as he did so. *He's dead... What do I do now? Why's it always me...? I can't be expected to carry on... but I must. I can't leave his body here... but I must. I need to get my friends to Hogwart's... Ron, Hermione....* Placing the dagger in his pocket, Harry rose.

Harry wiped away the tears and taking a final look at Ethan's lifeless body, turned away back to the bus, and the problem at hand. Now wasn't the time for guilt, or tears. He still had a job to do... Harry began to sprint back up the road. Forming a plan in his head as he went. He made himself think logically... *Okay, what do I need to do? Get everyone to safety at Hogwart's. How am I going to do that? Use the floo powder in the Granger's fireplace. Which means I need to get everybody back to Hermione's house. We need transport...*

Harry reached the bus just as Ron and the Muggle man were helping Hermione down off the roof. She was swaying unsteadily on her feet and looked slightly confused at the surroundings around her. Harry hoped it was only the bump on the head causing this, and not something more serious.

"Ron," he said as he drew level to the bus.

"Jesus, Harry. What the hell is going on? You look like you've been run over by the bloody Hogwart's Express!" exclaimed Ron, taking in Harry's weary form.

Harry nodded grimly. Ron was still bleeding across his cheek and half his face was caked in dry blood. "I feel like it as well," he said as Hermione finally placed her feet on the ground.

"Thank you," said Ron and Harry together to the stranger who had helped them. The man's wife was standing a short distance away, holding her side and looking around in utter disbelief at the destruction around her.

The man looked them up and down. "I'm not sure what's going on, lads," he said in his Irish accent. "But good luck to yer," he ended and turned away over to his wife.

"Are you okay, Hermione?" asked Ron, holding Hermione up with an arm under her shoulders.

She nodded slightly. "Just a bump on the head, Ron.... Harry? Harry, you look terrible!"

Harry ignored her. They had to get out of here, to Hogwart's. "Hermione," he said seriously. "How far is it to your parent's office? We have to get back to your house now." Harry began to hear siren's in the distance. The Muggle emergency services were arriving. He glanced at his watch and discovered it was only quarter to twelve. The first explosion had rung out through the street only twenty five minutes ago, Harry felt like it had been hours.

Hermione furrowed her brow in confusion and gingerly touched the lump on her head. "Ow...." she winced, but her strength was returning, as was her awareness. "It's... four streets over, Oxford Street. We have to head to the end of this one and turn right."

Harry nodded to Ron and in an instant they were off, each of them holding one of Hermione's arms to keep her steady on her feet. Harry was thankful they were going the opposite direction to where Rafe lied. Right now that would cause too many time wasting questions, and the pain from that was still yet to fully hit Harry, he didn't have time to grieve yet. They still had to pass several bodies on the street, though, and when they came to the large pile of unconscious Death Eater's Ron looked at Harry but didn't say anything and Harry didn't enlighten him.

At the end of the battle field that was once Flinders Street, there were half a dozen upturned cars smouldering in fire and smoke. On this new road, Grey Sky Drive, were some of the survivors and people who had just been caught in passing. The traffic had come to a dead halt at the entrance to Flinders Street and quite a crowd had developed of disgruntled motorists and pedestrians. Of course they took one look at the street and saw the death and destruction before turning away.

Some were helping the injured, though. As Harry and Ron struggled with Hermione, Harry saw the same Irish bloke who had helped him now helping with the injured in the road. *There are a few good people out there* he thought as they made good speed up Grey Sky Drive. Most

people on the street stood in shock as they saw the mangled, dead, or dying bodies of the innocent. It was truly a massacre, and nobody knew what to do.

They passed by the first turn off on Grey Sky and Harry could see the fourth one roughly three hundred metres down the road, that was the one they were making for. The Muggles looked at him in horror as he passed, their hands raised to their mouths.

Harry didn't know how he looked, but from their reactions he assumed it was bad. He raised his spare arm and rubbed the skin on his face along his left cheek. Harry cried out and almost dropped Hermione as he disturbed the protruding pieces of metal shrapnel embedded there and pushed them in further, they hurt. He also noticed that the glass lens on the left side of his glasses was shattered. *I must really look a mess* he thought.

They passed more and more helpless Muggles who had no experience in things like this, and they passed by the first of the emergency service vehicles. Harry was exhausted as they passed the third turn off, but Hermione said she felt fit enough to stand on her own now, so he and Ron let her go.

"Are you sure?" asked Ron. She just nodded grimly and the three of them continued down the street at a fast pace.

They were further away from the disaster area now, and some people weren't sure what was happening. Several called out to Harry to stop, but he ignored them. The traffic was moving up here and more and more emergency vehicles passed them by.

The Granger's practice wasn't that far down Oxford Street, and Harry recognised Mr. Granger's Ford Mustang in the car park, right below the sign that advertised the business.

Hermione led the way now. She ran across the car park as people stood in horror at the sight of them, all bloodied and torn. Hermione pushed open the glass door to the two storey building and the three of them entered quickly.

Harry and Ron followed Hermione down a white hallway and he barely noticed the pictures on the wall of the Granger's and their daughter as they passed by in a blur, or the door that said Surgery. They ran straight into the waiting room, which had three people sitting in chairs nervously. Two of them stood up as Harry, Ron, and Hermione came running in, but Harry once again ignored them.

"There we go, Mrs. Perkins," said a familiar voice to Harry's left. "Just don't eat anything for two hours and next year lay off all the Christmas-

"MUM!" screamed Hermione, tears running down her face.

Janet Granger looked up sharply and it took her a moment to register what she saw before she screamed loudly. "HERMIONE! What? BRIAN! BRIAN, GET OUT HERE NOW!"

Mrs. Granger ran over to her daughter quickly, and was closely followed by a confused looking Mr. Granger, who took one look at the three of them and cried out as well.

"What happened?" he asked quickly and sharply, wincing as his eyes fell on Harry's face.

"You have to drive us back to your house now!" said Harry quietly, but forcibly, while Ron nodded and Hermione cried into her mother's shoulder.

"What is going on?" repeated Mr. Granger.

"I'll explain on the way," said Harry nervously. They couldn't linger... he had to get to Hogwart's.

Mr. Granger looked from Harry to Ron and then Hermione in turn. "Right," he finally said, "come on. We have to get you to a hospital, Harry. Your face is ripped to shreds."

"NO!" shouted Harry. "It doesn't matter. Right now we have to get to your home."

The other people in the surgery watched with mouths agape as the argument raged. Mr. Granger finally relented. "Okay... but you better

know what you're doing!" he said angrily.

Mr. Granger dug into his pocket and pulled out his keys. Sensing the need of urgency, he set off at a slight jog. Harry followed, and then came Mrs. Granger still holding Hermione, and then Ron.

They were in the car and pulling out onto the street two minutes later. Harry briefly explained about the destruction four streets over, and pointed to the smoke rising from there. The sirens and flashing lights were everywhere as Mr. Granger turned onto Grey Sky Drive.

He took the first right so as to avoid the destruction zone. For the first time in an hour all the events began to catch up to Harry. He saw a thousand images in his mind flick by in quick succession. The first explosion, the dozens of Death Eater's, the levitated bus, his shield and how he had joined spells together, Dolores Umbridge, Ethan.... Harry wiped away another tear as he saw Ethan again, he would never forget that. But he couldn't grieve yet, there was still work to do. He felt for the dagger in his pocket that Ethan had given him. *I promise....*

"Are these people after you, Harry?" asked Mrs. Granger.

Harry nodded. *Why else would they be here?* "Yes," he croaked through his dry sore throat.

"Then what do you plan to do?" asked Mr. Granger.

"Just get us back to your home. We can escape to Hogwart's from there."

Ron looked at him; Harry thought that he looked really bad. He was pale and was obviously only just keeping it together. "How?" he asked.

"Dumbledore gave me some floo powder," Harry told him and Ron looked relieved.

Mr. Granger was taking the back streets home and was doing speeds that probably weren't legal.

After ten minutes they were in an area that Harry began to recognise. He thought they were about two minutes away. "You two will have to come

to Hog-" Harry leaned forward to say but was immediately thrown back as his scar burst with pain. He clasped his hand to his forehead and bit back the pain, but it was too late. He'd Seen.

"Shit," he said as the pain cleared.

"What is it?" asked Mr. Granger and Hermione quickly.

Harry clenched his jaw. "Just hurry it up," was all Harry said as his scar continued to burn fiercely.

In three minutes Mr. Granger was pulling the car into the drive way and before he had even fully stopped Harry jumped out of his door and raced towards the house. "Get to the living room," he shouted behind himself as he ran, and looked back to see everyone getting out of the car. The front door was locked, of course, but Harry quickly shouted an unlocking charm as he reached it and it burst open.

Without stopping he ran up the stairs two at a time. On the top one he collapsed as his scar burned again and sent him tripping over the stair to the floor. Harry cried angrily. *Come on* he thought getting up. He ran into his room and grabbed his bag from the base of his bed. He saw Ron's bag across the room and it was open. As quick as a flash Harry grabbed all his and Ron's loose belongings from the table and shoved them into Ron's bag. With a wave of his hand the bag zipped itself up and Harry slung it over his shoulder.

Harry had only taken one step forward when his scar exploded a third time and he fell to one knee. *Yeah, yeah I know he's coming* he thought angrily.

In less than five seconds Harry was running down the stairs and into the living room. Ron and Hermione were already standing by the fire, while Hermione tried to explain to her parents what was happening. As he entered Harry threw Ron his bag, he caught it deftly and slung it over his shoulder. Meanwhile, Harry ripped open his bag and dug around for the small bag of floo he knew to be there.

There was a loud resounding bang outside and Harry looked to the window to see a blue and gold shield sparkle in the air. Everyone else

saw it as well. *It's the wards* thought Harry. *He's bringing down the protection.*

Hermione realised what it was as well, and urged Harry to hurry up. It took Harry another moment to find the bag and when he did he cried triumphantly.

"Here," he said, grabbing his backpack and shoving it into Hermione's arms. He then pushed Hermione into the fireplace. Another loud bang and then Harry tore open the small pouch of powder. He took a pinch, looked desperately at Hermione for a moment before throwing it to the ground at her feet. She was immediately engulfed by the flames, and transported to safety.

"WHAT DID YOU DO!" shouted Mr. Granger, as he watched Hermione disappear in a ball of flames.

Harry had no time for this. He grabbed Mr. Granger's arm and pushed him roughly into the fireplace. "Don't worry," he said simply as the wards cracked and a shower of golden sparks rained to the ground. It would have been quite beautiful if it didn't mean they were no longer safe. "Shit," whispered Harry and threw some floo into the fireplace. In a flash Mr. Granger was gone.

"What are you doing?" cried Mrs. Granger this time.

"Ron get into the fireplace," shouted Harry as another, final bang was heard and this time blue sparks fell. That was it, the wards were gone. Ron stood in the fireplace now, and Harry threw some powder to his feet. He was gone in the green flames.

Harry sighed with the exhaustion. "Your turn," he said finally, turning to Mrs. Granger. She didn't budge. "MOVE!" shouted Harry and she took a few nervous steps into the fireplace. Harry breathed a sigh of relief and dug into the floo powder for a fourth time. It was then that, for the second time that day, Harry's world exploded.

The front of the house simply exploded. The glass was ripped from the windows and the plaster, brick and wood of the walls was vaporised into dust. Harry was thrown from the fireplace and onto the sofa which tipped

as he flew into it roughly. Harry could feel more shrapnel now embedded into his skin and he winced as he saw a piece of splintered wood stuck in his arm. "Argh," he cried as he pulled it out.

It was then that Harry noticed that his scar had stopped burning, and, despite the destruction of the front walls, all appeared calm.... but it was far from it. He didn't need to hear Mrs. Granger's scream of absolute terror, to know who stood where the wall to the house had moments before.

Harry rose slowly, carefully, fear gnawing at his stomach. He rose and looked into the face of Lord Voldemort.

"We meet again, Harry Potter," he hissed in his snake like voice.

"Voldemort," whispered Harry, and Mrs. Granger screamed again.

Harry never took his eyes of Voldemort, and Voldemort in turn never took his eyes from Harry. This was the first time since the Ministry that they had come face to face in reality, and despite all that Harry had said, he was afraid.

"Mrs. Granger," he said calmly, his eyes still on Voldemort. "The floo powder is by your feet, you know what to do."

Mrs. Granger was whimpering in fear and didn't seem capable of rational thought. "Always the hero, Potter," whispered Voldemort, pointing his wand at Mrs. Granger in the fireplace.

Harry's eyes widened as he watched Voldemort, standing on the rubble and destruction of the front of the house, do this. "Don't..." he said quickly, desperately.

A smile passed across Voldemort's face. "Put down you wand, Harry." Harry did without a second thought, the wood of his wand clunking to the floor. Voldemort now brought his own wand back to Harry.

"Mrs. Granger," shouted Harry, pure fear coursing through him. This time Janet Granger jumped and through her tears turned to Harry. "The floo powder," he said, pointing to the small bag but never leaving Voldemort's gaze. "Get out of here."

Harry didn't see her, but she nodded and reached out to grab the small bag. As she did, Voldemort slowly turned his wand again, a smile on his face. Harry looked from the wand to Mrs. Granger and then back to Voldemort in quick succession.

"NO!" he cried, jumping forward as Mrs. Granger opened the small bag and Voldemort began to form the words of a curse on his lips.

"AVADA..."

Mrs. Granger took a pinch of the floo.

"...KEDAVRA!"

The green light of death shot out of Voldemort's wand. The last Harry saw of the fireplace was Mrs. Granger throwing the powder to the floor, before the light hit it and it exploded into a thousand pieces, casting rubble and dusty smoke into the air. Harry desperately wished the smoke would clear, and when it did, he sighed with relief at the empty fireplace, though it was destroyed. He could no longer escape, but Mrs. Granger had.

Voldemort was laughing as Harry reached down and picked up his wand quickly. "She will die eventually," hissed Voldemort, turning back to Harry.

"Not before you," whispered Harry, hatred and disgust in his voice.

Voldemort laughed again. "Yes," he mused. "I thought I'd have to suffer some small words of bravado from the hero before the end."

"I don't fear you, Voldemort..." said Harry slightly untruthfully.

"No...?" Voldemort stared deep into Harry's eyes and after a moment Harry felt the familiar probing spike of Legilimency. He did his best to put up his Occlumency shields but it was no good.

"Get out of my head," cried Harry, raising his wand. "Incendio," he shouted.

Voldemort didn't even move as the spell flew towards him. Harry realised why a moment later as the fire spell was reflected by a Protego

shield charm protecting Voldemort. Harry cursed as his own spell came back at him and he barely dodged it in time.

This gave Voldemort the chance he needed. With a flick of his wand Harry felt every bone in his body go stiff, he couldn't move. Harry cried out as Voldemort effortlessly turned his wand to the right, and the bone in Harry's left arm did the same. There was a sickening crack as the bone snapped across his forearm and ripped through the flesh and skin, his blood splattering into the air. If Harry had had the power to move, he would have fallen to the ground from the pain.

"You have something of mine, Potter," hissed the Dark Lord.

Harry felt tears rolling down his cheek but he could do nothing about it. With another flick of his wand, Voldemort raised him into the air, where he still stood suspended. "My prophecy, Potter. You know of my prophecy."

Harry fought against the power of Voldemort's curse and slowly but surely lowered his neck so he could look Voldemort in the eye. "I'll never tell you it, Riddle."

Voldemort cried out in anger and threw Harry to the floor sharply with a simple flick of his wand. He cried out again and shoved his wand forward. To Harry it felt as if he had been hit in the face with a sledgehammer. He heard his nose crack and felt blood splatter down his face before the pain came. "ARGH..." he cried as Voldemort once again tightened his grip on Harry.

"I have other ways of making you talk. I can force it out of your mind, Potter. Tell me or suffer the pain," he shouted.

Harry spat out a mouthful of blood and rolled onto his side, coughing loudly. It was then that he realised he'd landed on his wand. He placed a finger on it and with a thought sent it back into the holster. He rolled back over and resumed coughing, both his broken nose and arm bleeding heavily. "Do your worst," shouted Harry through the pain and spat once more, but this time at Voldemort's robes.

"Very well, Harry. Again I must suffer the Gryffindor in you. You must

know that, in the end, heroes always lose. They die trying, Harry. With your death the world will be thrown into chaos."

"Like it was when you killed, Fudge," croaked Harry. "You'll never make me tell you a thing...."

"Talk all you want, Potter. Magic has no laws with which to abide. You will break, just like young Ethan did."

Harry blinked once as Voldemort was swimming in and out of focus. He briefly realised he's lost his glasses, and was having trouble focusing on anything. It was then that the real pain started. "*Legimens soltu rox*" hissed Voldemort and Harry instantly felt some other presence in his mind, digging viciously for information.

Harry cried as it dug further and further, searching for the prophecy. He realised there was absolutely nothing he could do, no one was coming to save him. Voldemort would find the information, just like he had done with Ethan. The sharp spike dug to the deepest reaches of his mind, and Harry's weak Occlumency shields were torn down as if they were paper. And finally, when the pain had become blinding, there it was.

Harry felt the probe touch the prophecy, the words he had unfortunately committed to memory. He then felt a scraping in his throat and he opened his mouth. "The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches...." Harry fought it, but Voldemort's magic was incredible, Harry's was a weak shadow in comparison. "... born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies..." Harry felt Voldemort's emotions of victory, satisfaction, and eagerness as he spoke the unknown parts of the prophecy.

"Yes..." hissed Voldemort.

"...and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but- but he will... have power the Dark Lord knows not..." Harry saw with some satisfaction that Voldemort was no longer smiling. "...and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives... the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies...."

Harry coughed and sighed with relief as the probe spike was removed from his mind. It was short lived though as the pain in his nose and arm returned, along with the feeling of utter defeat. Voldemort had heard the prophecy.

Harry looked into the confused face of the Dark Lord for a moment as he put together what he had heard. He looked around himself, looking for anyway to escape. But he couldn't walk, could barely breath and he felt dizzy from all the effort and blood loss over the past few hours.

He was only scarcely aware of Voldemort turning to face him. "Yes..." he whispered. "It makes sense now. Why else would Fate draw us together so often?" Voldemort laughed and Harry felt pure fear flow through his veins. It was then that Voldemort turned deadly serious. "And either must die at the hand of the other..." he said quietly.

"Yeah... that part pissed me off too," coughed Harry, his broken nose bleeding profusely.

"Silence, Potter," hissed Voldemort. Harry now saw the look of triumph upon his face Voldemort was sure he had won. He walked from the destruction of the front of the house, and over to Harry in three quick steps, kicking pieces of rubble and debris as he went.

Harry felt the cold wood of Voldemort's wand as it was trailed along his forehead. His scar burst with pain and he cried out anew. "Any final words, Potter?" asked Voldemort.

Harry was breathing heavily and his scar was burning viciously. He looked around at the destruction before turning back to look into the red, pitiless eyes of Voldemort. "Only one," said Harry, moving his right hand and resting it on his stomach, palm down. "Apyraceus!"

The world blurred and in the small time between blinking Harry went from looking into the face of death to looking into the cloudy sky. But something wasn't right.... He had felt a jarring during the Apparation; he wasn't where he'd planned to be. He wasn't at Hogsmeade. Harry lay there, not quite sure of where he was; only knowing that Voldemort wasn't here. And as the snow fell lightly onto his face, and the snow beneath him began to turn red with his blood, Harry finally gave up the

fight and passed out.

Chapter 17 - Veil and Unto Death

There are no great men, only great challenges that ordinary men are forced by circumstances to meet.

--William F. Halsey

The green light of death shot out of Voldemort's wand. The last Harry saw of the fireplace was Mrs. Granger throwing the powder to the floor, before the light hit it and it exploded into a thousand pieces, casting rubble and dusty smoke into the air. Harry desperately wished the smoke would clear, and when it did, he sighed with relief at the empty fireplace, though it was destroyed. He could no longer escape, but Mrs. Granger had.

The world spun for Janet Granger and the wind in her ears was absolutely deafening. She struggled to hold herself together, as she sensed the journey's end. She opened her eyes as the wind died down, and the spinning stopped. Before her was a red carpet with inlaid gold. It took her a moment to realize she was lying on the floor.

"MUM!"

Janet looked up from the floor, tears of fear still in her eyes, and into the face of her daughter. "Hermione," she whispered. "Oh... Hermione..."

Mrs. Granger was lifted to her feet by her husband and daughter. When she rose, she saw that they weren't the only ones in the room. Ron was standing across the way, holding a tissue to the cut on his face and standing tall against them all was an old man with a long silvery beard.

"Mrs. Granger," said the bearded man seriously. "Please, what caused your delay?"

Janet swayed on her feet unsteadily for a moment and then saw that face again. The face of her worst nightmares. A creature straight out of a horror film come to life. She cried again. "It was Harry...." she cried. "Harry saved me from *him*." Everyone in the room instantly knew who '*him*' was. Hermione raised a hand to her mouth and Ron fell back against the wall.

The old man took a quick step forward, fear in his eyes; he removed a bag from his robes as he went. After pushing passed them all Dumbledore stepped into the fireplace, wand drawn. "The Granger residence," he said swiftly, dropping the entire pouch of floo powder in his haste.

Green flames roared up from the soot covered floor and enveloped Albus Dumbledore, but something was wrong. Almost instantly the flames retreated and Dumbledore was left standing in the fireplace. Confusion was on his face for a moment before he came up with a reason, and his face drained of all colour as the answer faced him. *The fireplace has been destroyed.... Harry... Oh god, Harry... you're on your own....*

The world blurred and in the small time between blinking Harry went from looking into the face of death to looking into the cloudy sky. But something wasn't right.... He had felt a jarring during the Apparation; he wasn't where he'd planned to be. He wasn't at Hogsmeade. Harry lay there, not quite sure of where he was; only knowing that Voldemort wasn't here. And as the snow fell lightly onto his face, and the snow beneath him began to turn red with his blood, Harry finally gave up the fight and passed out....

Voices...? He heard voices, but the world was dark... what were they saying?

"Yes, brought in yesterday.... No identification, pockets were empty apart from about two hundred quid and this long dagger, the dagger was covered in blood..... Face torn to shreds, dozens of splinters riddled his body.... miracle he's alive. Had this wooden stick on him, strapped to his right wrist, we couldn't get it off, it's stitched to his skin or something....?"

Left arm was shattered, as was his nose...."

Harry opened his eyes slowly, the light of the world coming into sharp contrast and he shut them again quickly against it. He groaned as this happened and was instantly aware of the throbbing pain across his face. "Argh..." his voice broke as he used his throat and that hurt as well.

There was a beeping in his ear and he heard the rush of footsteps coming to meet him. "He's waking up," said one voice.

"Should I get the doctor?" asked another, more nervous one.

Harry opened his eyes again and this time the light wasn't so bad. He opened his eyes and looked into a pair of blue ones. "Hello?" whispered Harry.

The woman leaning over him smiled. She had shoulder length brown hair to go with her blue eyes and a sharp pointed face that appeared friendly. "Hi," she said back.

Harry blinked and then tried to sit up in the bed he was lying on. "Easy there," said the woman, pushing him back down effortlessly, he was incredibly weak. "You're not ready for that yet."

Harry frowned as the beeping in his ear continued. "Does anyone else hear that beeping?" he asked sleepily.

The woman smiled again. "You're in hospital, mate. I'm Nurse Harrison and the beeping is the machine that's monitoring you."

Harry coughed and only just heard what she said. "Where am I?" he asked.

"Hospital, buddy," repeated the nurse with a warm smile on her face. It was obvious she thought he wasn't himself.

Harry frowned. "No... *Where* am I? Where, in the country?"

Nurse Harrison frowned. "You really don't know? This is the county hospital in Hereford? Where did you think you were?"

Harry closed his eyes and moved his neck from side to side, stretching

the muscles. He had dreamed of a bridge of light, surrounded with a strong beam of golden light.... and Sirius! It had seemed so real. "Don't know?"

"Right," said the other nurse who had just returned with the doctor. "Here he is, Doctor."

Harry looked up from his pillow and into the face of an elderly Asian doctor. He had a short grey moustache to match his short grey hair and was wearing glasses. It was then that Harry realized he was also wearing glasses, but they weren't his original pair. They'd been replaced but they were practically the same, except for a slight curve of the frame. "Good Morning, young man," said the slightly shorter than average doctor.

"Morning," replied Harry weakly.

The doctor crossed the room and came to a stop at the side of Harry's bed. He was on the opposite side to Nurse Harrison. "How do you feel, son?"

"My face hurts," whispered Harry, raising a hand to his face and rubbing the bandages that had been placed there.

The doctor nodded and made a note on his clipboard. "And your arm?"

Harry looked down to his left arm and saw it encased in plaster. He couldn't feel it at all. "Can't feel a thing...." he said with a frown.

The doctor nodded again. "And finally your nose?"

Harry sighed and brushed his good hand across his nose. There were small bandages there as well, but his nose did feel a lot bigger than usual. "Yeah... nothing. How's it look?"

The doctor was silent, as if searching for the right words. Nurse Harrison was a lot more forward. "There'll be heavy scarring when the bandages come off, but since you're so young most of it will heal in time... but some of it won't..."

Harry nodded and sighed again, as his mind fell into all the memories of

the previous... *what day was it?* "What's the date?" he asked, coughing heavily.

"December 28th," said the doctor. "You were brought in off the high moors about thirty six hours ago."

Harry did some quick math. If the attack had been the twenty sixth, then the times did add up. His mind slipped again and soon he was back on the street. *Ethan...* he thought. *God damn it...* A silent tear rolled down his bandaged cheek, but thankfully none of the medical personnel in the room mentioned it.

"You've had two blood transfusions and the stitches on your face need to be cleaned, but that can wait. Now that you're awake I think it's time you answered a few questions," said the doctor.

"Like what?" asked Harry, immediately on his guard.

"Your name for one," began the doctor, "how you sustained your injuries, what you were doing with this..." The doctor reached across to the table and picked up a small tray. Harry saw that it held Rafe's dagger, and his Muggle money bag. He clenched his jaw nervously.

Harry sighed. He needed to get to Hogwarts, and soon. *Should I tell them my name?* he thought. *If people are looking for me it could help, but what if Voldemort finds me first....?* "My name's Harry," he said finally.

"Harry? Harry who?"

"Just Harry..."

The doctor frowned and appeared slightly frustrated. "Okay, *Harry*. What happened to you?"

Hogwart's Castle

Arthur Weasley paced Dumbledore's office anxiously. Molly had taken all the kids plus Mr. and Mrs. Granger to the Great Hall for lunch. After Harry had been declared missing, he, Molly, Ginny and Fred and

George had come straight to Hogwart's. It was now only Dumbledore and himself in the office.

"I've put the whole Ministry on alert," said Arthur, continuing his pacing. "We'll find him, Albus, we'll find him."

Albus Dumbledore removed his half moon spectacles and rubbed his tired old eyes. He hadn't slept since Harry went missing, and he was unlikely to until Harry was found. "It is becoming more and more likely that Voldemort took him, Arthur," sighed Dumbledore, with upmost dread in his voice.

"We don't know that for sure...."

Dumbledore sighed again, and looked back to two days ago. As soon as the floo had failed, Dumbledore had raced off the school grounds to Apparate. It had still taken him fifteen minutes to reach the gates, and then when he did Apparate, all that greeted him was rubble and ash.... shrouded in the Dark Mark. The house was empty, neither Voldemort nor Harry were to be found.

"I have to leave," said Harry, who had grown weary of the doctor's questions.

"Impossible," he replied. "There's something going on here, we need to know. If you need help, Harry... or... if you need to talk to the police? We can help."

Harry sighed with frustration. He had to get to Hogwart's and discover what was happening. *What if his friends thought he was dead?* He had to get out now. "No, you're not listening. I have to leave."

"We could contact your parents-" began Nurse Harrison.

Harry looked down. "No.... I just... just have to go...."

The small doctor was clearly annoyed at Harry's lack of cooperation, but Harry barely noticed, he was lost in his mind again. He was back on the street, the sounds, sights, and smells fresh in his mind. One thing stuck

out in amazing clarity against the rest, and that was his control of magic... or rather its control over him. Harry had been truly scared at the amount of power running through him whilst facing the Death Eater's and what's more he hadn't even known how he was using it? He needed advice, needed guidance; he needed to talk to Dumbledore.

Harry blinked and shook his head quickly, he once again attempted to get out of the bed, but the nurse pushed him back. Harry growled slightly under his breath. *My friends will be worried about me* he thought *and I'm worried about them....* Harry contemplated using magic, but dismissed the idea just as quickly, they were innocent Muggles. He would wait for now, but he wouldn't wait long....

Meanwhile the doctor had left in a huff after checking that his bandages were set, and now it was just him and the nurse.

"Anything I can do for you, Harry?" she asked.

"You can let me go," he said bluntly. "I have places I need to be."

"Really... where?"

Harry sighed. "Nowhere."

"Not a very social person, are you?" she commented, updating his chart with the information from the monitor.

I have no time for this he thought, but since he was here, he might as well and try to get some information. "So... do you know anything about that attack in Abingdon?" Harry tried to keep his face as straight as he could, lest his emotions betray him.

The nurse looked up quickly, sharply. "How could you possibly know about that?" she asked, confusion and suspicion heavy in her voice. Harry didn't answer, but willed her to continue with his eyes. She sighed. "You're an interesting fellow, Harry," she began shaking her head. "Well what can I say? Worst terrorist attack since the plane over Lockerbie.... Entire street destroyed, millions in damage and one hundred and fifty six casualties...."

Harry nodded and instantly began cursing Voldemort under his breath.

He also realized the hopelessness of his situation. Voldemort had beaten him bad, again almost killed him, and Harry's magic had been nothing compared to his. He was powerful when battling Death Eaters, they were weak and he was determined. But Harry couldn't hold his own against Voldemort, not yet... Harry reckoned the only one able to teach him the skills he needed was Dumbledore. Dumbledore could fight Voldemort, and Harry was sure he'd teach him to control his magic. *At least it was a plan* he thought. *And next time Voldemort, I'll be a force to be reckoned with...*

"Absolutely terrible," continued Nurse Harrison shaking her head. "No terrorist groups have claimed the blame for it yet but it's only a matter of time."

Harry couldn't listen much longer; he needed to hear what had really happened. Where the Death Eater's he'd stunned were? What was the Ministry's response? Where Voldemort was now? "Listen," he said. "Could I go to the bathroom please?"

Harry saw the bathroom across the room, it contained a toilet and sink with a window looking out across the town of Hereford. He looked out of the window across from his bed and saw the city again, and he also saw that he was several stories up. There was no way he could leave the room under normal, non magical circumstances. Nurse Harrison knew this as well.

"All right," she said. "I'll be just outside the door. If you're not out in five minutes I won't hesitate to come in."

Harry nodded and wondered how she possibly thought he could escape? He couldn't scale the building! Especially with a broken arm.... He watched her disconnect him from the monitoring machines and then with a warm, but suspicious smile, she left the room.

Harry jumped straight into action. As soon as she was gone he pulled the bed sheet aside and quickly jumped to his feet. It wasn't easy. His legs ached from two days of disuse and he swayed heavily and his vision blurred from the sudden physical effort. Harry held his stomach and stood still for a moment as it settled. As soon as he felt a bit better he took three quick steps over to the bathroom, but stopped halfway across

the room and turned back to the bedside table.

The dagger and his roll of Muggle money still lay there. Harry stepped back over to the table and picked up these items. *I promised Ethan....* The dagger had been cleaned of dried blood and now that it was gone, Harry could see fine runes in a flowing script ran the length of the blade.

He shook his head and turned back around towards the bathroom. Once he reached it, Harry had a good look in the mirror, and what he saw made him cringe. His face, if it could be called his anymore, resembled a train wreck. His nose was practically flattened and there was an irregular bump on it that stuck out quite viciously. His eyes were bloodshot so much that the whites were more red than white, it made him look scary. Also his right and some of his left cheek were heavily bandaged and these bandages were slightly red as well, with blood.

Harry raised his right hand to these bandages and for the first time noticed his wand holster complete with wand still strapped to his arm. He smiled to himself; the charms on it would've prevented the hospital staff from removing it. He turned his attention back to the bandages. They were stuck to his face with medical tape. Harry slowly edged the tape away and winced slightly as he disturbed the cuts beneath them. Eventually he got the bandages off, but realized instantly he was better off with them on.

The three dozen or so little stitches in his cheek made the cuts more prominent. There were about sixteen of these quarter of an inch long cuts across his face and Harry hoped desperately that Madam Pomfrey could heal them properly.

There was a knock on the door. "You okay in there, Harry?" called the nurse from outside.

"Yeah, yeah I'll just be a minute," he lied, flicking his wrist and bringing his wand up from the holster.

Harry stared down at the blue hospital issue smock. It was horrible to say the least, it was way too revealing, but it was also something to work with. Harry waved his wand across the cloth and muttered a small transfiguration spell under his breath. The smock was transfigured

almost instantly, and, with a small tingle, turned into Harry's customary black shirt and jeans. *That's better* he thought, picking up the dagger. He realised that there was no sheath for the blade, and that it was incredibly sharp.

Harry thought of Ethan again as he stared up and down the blade and a tear fell down his face, getting caught in the stitching. He placed the dagger carefully in his jeans pocket along with the Muggle money. *It wasn't yet time to grieve... I'm not home free yet!*

"Harry?" shouted the nurse again.

This time Harry didn't answer her. Instead he picked up his wand and held his broken arm close to his body, the plaster cool against his stomach. *Okay he thought concentrate, and hope it works properly this time.* Harry pictured the road just outside of the castle gates clearly. He saw the forest on either side and the small ditch that ran down the length of the road. "Apyraceus!" he whispered, as the door to the room opened, but the room itself was now empty.

Harry appeared almost instantly hundreds of miles away outside of his home. He stood on icy ground and stared at Hogwart's castle standing strong against the world around it. *Time to face it all* he thought, taking a few steps forward. But they weren't easy steps. Harry realized he was over doing it already. He'd only been out of hospital fifteen seconds and he was weak. The world spun around him and his eyes didn't seem to focus that well.

He continued on weakly, the snow falling lightly and coming to rest on his head and shoulders. The wind blew cold against him, and Harry felt sick to his stomach. He was only halfway up the drive when he had to stop. His legs felt as weak as jelly and as he came to a stop and leaned against the snow covered embankment, Harry rolled over and retched. This brought up the meagre contents of his stomach and hurt his throat terribly.

Almost there he thought, standing back up and carrying on. *Come on, Harry...* he willed himself. *So close...* The world grew fainter and fainter as the castle drew ever closer. Every step began to be a struggle, but slowly the great wooden entrance doors seemed to loom before him.

Harry smiled slightly. He'd made it. With an effort he pushed hard against the door, throwing his whole weight against it. The door swung inwards and Harry fell to the floor just inside of the entrance, and promptly threw up again. Harry rolled over on the floor and stared into the brick of the ceiling. It was an odd sort of state that he found himself in, he felt... different. He found himself thinking about things he hadn't for years, like his first day of Muggle School, or the first time he'd gone to the park near Privet Drive, Dudley throwing his television against the wall... a thousand other childhood memories.

It was then that something awoke in Harry's mind, like the first sparks of a fire, and he realized he was passing in and out of consciousness. The spark in his mind brought him back to his senses slightly, gave him a final strength. Harry rolled back over onto his stomach and saw the floor before his eyes. With his good right arm he pushed hard against the floor, raising himself to his knees. It had all taken its toll; the pure magic, the fight, the injuries, the days in hospital, the effort from simply walking up the castle drive. He had pushed his body to the limit, and left little with which to carry on with.

"Hello," he whispered from the floor. "Hello," he said again a little louder. "Anyone?"

His life was coming into its starkest clarity now as he stared at the deserted entrance hall. He was all alone, as he had been most of his life. "Is anybody there?" he cried, a tear rolling down his face. All of it, all of the pain, the misery, the suffering, the anguish, the murder, the death, the war... it all flashed before his eyes on an endless reel. *Will it ever end?* he cried in his mind. Mum, Dad, Cedric, Sirius, the Dursleys, and now Ethan. *How can anyone be expected to carry on?* he thought bitterly. "What can I do?" *When can I rest?* It had been building up, building up for fifteen years and now Harry felt more tired than he had ever done in his entire life. He felt as if there were a thousand Dementors surrounding him, making a happy thought impossible. Harry was mentally, physically, and magically drained.

His eyes were so heavy. *I could just close them and never open them again* he thought as the cold, unforgiving snow blew in through the open door and settled on him gently. *Finally have a rest...*

"NO!" he shouted with a strong conviction in his voice. "If I quit, he wins..." he said. "If I quit, he wins," repeated Harry, forcing himself to listen to that thought. *If I quit, Voldemort wins....* Harry felt that thought slipping away, and before his eyes fell a veil, the Veil of Death. *Sirius...* With nothing tethering him to this world, Harry reached out and touched the silvery veil. It was cold, cruelly so and he tried to pull away from the darkness.

There was a creaking in the distance but Harry barely heard it. The darkness was upon him, and the world he knew was bitter and filled with evil and loss. And then, against that very darkness came a golden thread of strength, something to keep him tethered to the world instead of floating away towards the Veil. Harry heard a voice, his thread, and the darkness before his eyes lessened.

"HARRY! It's you," shouted a familiar voice from across the room. The owner of the voice ran from the Great Hall entrance to the Castle entrance quickly.

Harry smiled, or at least he would have smiled if he had the strength to. "Hello, Ginny," he whispered. "How are you?"

Ginny quickly looked Harry up and down. He was barely recognizable, and had obviously been treated by Muggles. His eyes were flickering with life, but then seemed darker as if he was fighting an inner struggle with himself. Willing himself to stay awake, while at the same time wanting so much to sleep. They were also horrifyingly bloodshot so that absolutely no white showed in them.

"Come on, Harry," she said nervously, kneeling down next to him and placing a hand on his shoulder. "Let's get you up to the hospital wing..."

Harry turned his head slightly and his eyes connected with hers. "Ginny?"

"Yes, Harry. It's me. Come on, we have to stand up, okay?"

Harry thought about this and looked from the veil before his eyes, and then passed that and into Ginny's eyes. She had said something... stand up? "Okay" he whispered and the veil vanished instantly, but he was still

weak from it all. "You're gonna have to help me, though...."

Ginny nodded and put her arm under Harry's good one and grasped his left shoulder across his back. With all the strength she could muster she lifted him up heavily off the floor. Harry helped as best he could, bracing his legs as he was pulled up. As soon as he was on his feet, he fell slightly but Ginny caught him deftly and his head rolled onto her shoulder. She bent her knees slightly under his full weight. Ginny was slightly shorter than Harry, who was just around six foot even, and he was heavy.

"I'm sorry, Ginny," he said quietly, into her ear.

Ginny panted and they began to take a few slow steps forward. "Its okay, Harry. I'm just glad you're alive."

It was slow going. Harry helped as much as he could but he was just too weak. Ginny struggled with his weight on her side and his arm draped across her neck, holding him up. The stairs were a challenge but eventually, with a little help from Harry they made it up.

After the first stairs Ginny avoided the others when she could. It was difficult as it was, though she persevered. The hallways were, unfortunately, empty. There were about a dozen students in the castle, most of the staff, and her family, but no one was to be seen now.

Harry seemed to regain more of his strength the closer to the hospital they drew. About halfway there he stood up straight on his feet and walked under his own strength, but still had his right arm draped over Ginny for support.

Harry saw dark spots before his eyes, and he blinked to try and clear them. The spots disappeared slightly and his vision lightened. But it didn't last long. They returned and this time when Harry blinked they remained. His vision was going.

Soon he couldn't walk under his own power again and relied solely on Ginny, who was struggling. They were a floor down from the hospital wing when it became too much for both of them. Ginny fell against the wall from the effort and Harry fell from her grasp, hitting the floor hard but

unconscious before he did. Everything was black.

"I don't think we can rule out mental trauma either," said Madam Pomfrey solemnly.

"What?" asked Ron.

They were standing around Harry's bed in the infirmary. After Ginny's collapse in the corridor, she had levitated Harry the rest of the way. Madam Pomfrey had immediately set to work and Harry was now recuperating slowly. His stitching on his face had been removed and the wounds there had been repaired magically, as had his nose that now looked perfectly normal. His arm had been more of a challenge as the Muggle doctors had had to push the bone back in and then stitch it up, but in the end Madam Pomfrey had succeeded and Harry's arm was now in a sling.

"Brain damage, Mr. Weasley. He's been through a traumatic time, more so than most."

"But it's not the first time stuff like this has happened to him, and he came through that all right," argued Ron, anger on his best friends defence in his voice

"Did he?" questioned Madam Pomfrey, whilst Hermione moved over to the bed and grasped Harry's hand. "How do you know he's not been hiding the pain? Some scars aren't always seen. Mr. Weasley... they go deeper. I believe his life may have finally caught up with him, and what he saw pushed him over the edge."

"He's still Harry," said Ginny without any doubt in her voice. She was sitting in a chair that she had pulled up close to the bed a few hours ago. She hadn't left since. "I could still see our Harry when I found him in the hall, he's there."

Madam Pomfrey looked at Ginny with what may have been pity, but she didn't say anything. It was Mrs. Granger that spoke next. Mr. and Mrs. Granger had been given guest quarters for the time being, and spent most of their time with Hermione. "He's strong," she said to Ginny. "He'll

pull through...." Ginny smiled slightly, any encouragement was good.

The afternoon of December 28th passed with an agonising slowness. The minute of the clock felt like hours but no one left the bed, and all the while Harry slept. They had heard about Ethan of course. Dumbledore had been one of the first wizard's on the scene after the attack and Rafe's body was found by him. There was going to be a small funeral for him tomorrow, at the wizard's graveyard on the far side of Hogsmeade. Dumbledore had arranged it all.

Harry groaned in his bed and his eyes moved underneath his eyelids. Everyone in the room looked over expectantly, but he only stirred slightly. He didn't wake....

The minutes did in fact pass into hours but Harry remained dead to the world. At one point Ron, Hermione, and Ginny went to the Great Hall to eat with the other remaining students, but Harry was still out when they returned.

The evening passed into late night and Mr. and Mrs. Granger were led back to their rooms by Hermione, who was staying with them for a time. Ron went soon after at around ten thirty, leaving just Ginny with Harry.

Ginny sat there, with only a small lamp for light that was casting half shadows on the wall, for some time. She sat gazing intently at Harry, as if she could discover what he was thinking just by staring at him. His forehead was creased and his eyes darted to and fro beneath his eyelids. He was dreaming.... about what she didn't care to think. It probably wasn't pretty. Ginny felt an extreme amount of pity for him at the moment, and she smiled slightly at the fact that Harry would hate that.

Ginny heard the bangs of pots and cauldrons as Madam Pomfrey prepared some potion or concoction in her office, and Harry stirred ever so slightly at the noise, but didn't awake. It was then that Ginny pulled something out of her pocket, a small black square, and her wand.

In the weak light and quietness of the night she whispered a small spell, and the black square enlarged itself several times over and became something a lot more special. Ginny put her wand aside and smiled as she ran her hand across the golden letters; *Everlasting Thoughts*. Her

journal, Harry's Christmas present to her. Her eyes flicked over to Harry and she saw the ring, that was her present, on the index finger of his right hand.

Ginny smiled again but then looked down to the journal, and slowly opened the front cover. Her smiling face instantly turned to a confused, questioning one. She saw the message that Harry had written, it had only been three days since she saw it, and the words must have passed a million times through her head since then.

Dear Ginny,

For when the thoughts become too much

Love,

Harry

It had been the perfect present, given to her by the one person who could understand what it meant to be in *his* mind, and to have *him* in yours. *For when the thoughts become too much...* She hadn't written in it yet, as she hadn't had any time in which to reflect yet. There was a final thing as well, a small thing really, but it had the most meaning. *Love, Harry.*

Those two words were what Ginny kept pondering. They had lain heavily on her mind since Christmas. *Could he love her...?* Ginny found the thought absolutely exhilarating, whilst at the same time ultimately terrifying. *Was it just something he wrote? Or did he mean it?*

She had written the same back to him on her present, and now briefly wondered if he had put as much thought into it as she had. *No she thought. When would he have had time....? And why would he anyway?*

Ginny shook her head. *No... he doesn't love me, he hardly even notices me...* she told herself, with some conviction in her voice, but not much. *If he didn't, then why did he buy you the journal?* Ginny thought hard for the answer to this question. *Because he's just that type of person. Someone who cares for others more than he cares for himself...*

Ginny sighed and rubbed her tired eyes. She shrunk the journal back

down and returned it to her pocket, the same questions whirling across her mind. "Goodnight, Harry," she whispered, extinguishing the small torch and turning on her heel, heading for Gryffindor tower.

Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and the Grangers breakfasted the next morning together. The sky reflected their mood in the Great Hall, angry, sad, and fearful. Storm clouds raged overhead and lightning forked the sky. Ron and Hermione in particular were feeling down, today was Ethan's funeral.

After breakfast they decided to go see how Harry was doing, and if there was any chance at all he'd wake up before the day was out. So as soon as they were finished, the small group of five began the journey up and through the castle, to the Hospital wing. They passed silently by the old portraits and armour, passed all the empty classrooms and in time finally came to the doors of the hospital wing.

Ginny pushed them open and in they walked single file. The hospital wing was quiet, eerily so, and as they walked over to Harry's bed they all noticed something odd. The bed was there, but Harry wasn't.

Harry walked calmly and slowly through the ancient halls. His thoughts were a mix of pain, fear, and acceptance at the events of the past three days. Most of it reeled across his mind, bringing the death back to him. He saw the bus hovering above his head, he saw Ethan in the street, and he saw Voldemort's look of triumph just before he had Apparated.

Harry sighed and shook his head, hoping this would clear it of all the destruction, it didn't. He passed by a window and saw the fierce storm raging across the sky, a bolt of lightning fell particularly close and it was reflected brilliantly across Harry's slightly tear filled eyes.

His thoughts took him to the stone gargoyle that guarded Dumbledore's office, but it was already up. *Either I'm expected* thought Harry, *or I'm not the only one here....* He wanted desperately to talk to Dumbledore, to find some answers, especially about Ethan. But at the same time he was terrified of what he might hear.

Harry ascended the stairs slowly, holding his sore arm close to his stomach. He had of course looked in the mirror before leaving the hospital wing, and was pleased to see he looked like his old self again. Apart from one single scar on his left cheek, that was only noticeable if one looked hard, and his sore arm, he was fully healed.

Approaching the wooden door to the office, Harry listened attentively for any sound from within. There was a discussion going on, but whether it was just Dumbledore and his portraits Harry couldn't tell? With a small moment of hesitation at what he might hear inside, Harry knocked on the door.

The voices immediately died down and Harry waited. "Come in," said the elderly voice of Dumbledore from within.

Harry opened and walked strongly through the door, no emotion showing on his face, betraying how weak he felt. Dumbledore was seated at his desk and standing opposite him, near the fireplace, was Arthur Weasley.

"Harry," said Mr. Weasley happily, walking over and placing a hand on his shoulder. "How are you?"

"Fine," replied Harry automatically. Neither Dumbledore nor Mr. Weasley believed that he was.

"Why don't you take a seat, Harry," said Dumbledore calmly. "Arthur was just leaving..." Dumbledore stared at Mr. Weasley over his half moon spectacles and he took the hint.

"Yes... er... yes. Well I've got to go, Ministry to run and all. Glad you're well, Harry," he said finally. Harry didn't reply, he just slowly lowered himself into the chair next to the desk, his limbs aching from the effort of his life. Mr. Weasley gave one quick worried glance to Dumbledore, before turning away and exiting the office.

As the door closed and Mr. Weasley's footsteps died away, silence reigned in the room. It seemed the whole world held its breath as the two of them, student and headmaster, stared into each others eyes. Neither broke away, neither gave away any sign as to what they were feeling.

The portraits around the room watched silently, even they could feel the tension building.

"Harry-" began Dumbledore.

"Who was he?" said Harry coolly, his voice sounding like automation, no feeling in it.

Dumbledore was silent again and he grasped the desk in front of him with his left hand, a thousand thoughts passing through his mind as to how best to say what he had to say. Meanwhile, Harry grew impatient at the delay, his fuse was short when lit and Dumbledore hesitating ignited it. Harry stood.

"I thought I could get some answers here," whispered Harry calmly. "I was obviously wrong." He turned to leave and took only two steps before Dumbledore spoke.

"Ethan Rafe..." he said, his voice shaking, "was born Tom Riddle Jr."

Harry's world spun. In an instant he saw a kaleidoscope of images pass before his eyes. So many instances involving Ethan, so many unanswered questions all answered in three short words. *Tom Riddle Junior*. There he was in the shack, teaching him Apparation. At breakfast, sitting and staring sadly into space. His reaction to the Diagon Alley attack, his anger and questioning of Voldemort. Harry didn't know how he felt about this? Angry... maybe... betrayed?

"You knew this?" said Harry, turning back around and falling into the chair. "You knew he was Voldemort's son and still you let him come to Hogwart's?"

"I did," nodded Dumbledore. "I also knew he was a good person. It was his choices that made him who he was, not his blood."

Harry heard this and he knew it to be true. Ethan had never, and probably would have never served Voldemort. It wasn't his fault who his father was, it was just bad luck. Harry sighed and rubbed his cheek with his right hand. He felt the slight stubble there and sighed again. "Did you find him?"

Dumbledore seemed to lose the twinkle in his eyes and the brilliant green in Harry's dulled as they both pictured Ethan lying dead in the centre of the street of destruction. "I did..." said Dumbledore. "I have prepared a small funeral service this afternoon. You are, of course, invited."

Harry nodded but was staring absently at the desk in front of him. *Again I'm the survivor* he thought. *But why?* A silent tear rolled down his bruised cheek and it was quickly joined by another.

"Harry, Ethan-"

"Didn't deserve his life," growled Harry. "And nor do I!" Harry stopped, he hadn't meant to say that end part, he hated pity, but since he had said it he might as well get a few things off his chest.

Dumbledore blinked and for a moment a shadow passed over his face. "Life isn't always what we want it to be, Harry."

"It isn't fair," he whispered, his emotions of pain and anguish now clear on his face. Dumbledore looked into his emerald green eyes and what he saw scared him. The eyes were that of a man who has seen and done things that no one should have to. Who has witnessed death, and caused it. They were dull, grey and black rings surrounded them, showing the weary effort it was to live for him. Harry continued.

"I never asked for this, never wanted it. I DIDN'T WANT TO BE THE ONE EVERYBODY PUT THEIR HOPE IN!" he finished shouting, rising once again from the chair, tears of anger and fear rolling from his eyes. "I'm so sick of it all. It's so hard... Why do I have to suffer because of that damn prophecy?"

Dumbledore simply surveyed Harry for a moment, as if he had expected this outburst for a long time. If truth be told he had. "We are not given a choice, Harry, to choose our lot in life. You have had more than your fair share of burdens, that is true, but you have persevered and still continue to live."

"Not through choice," whispered Harry, his face nothing but an expression of pain. "Death haunts me everywhere I go... it plagues me,

but never takes me. I'm always left alone to pick up the goddamn pieces of my life when I should have died with my parents fifteen years ago...."

Silence once again took hold of the office. The headmasters and mistresses in the portraits practically hung out of their frames with anticipation and Fawkes, the golden phoenix, cried a shrill note that, despite it all, warmed Harry. "Don't give up, Harry," said Dumbledore, almost pleadingly.

"It's just so hard," sighed Harry, his head resting on his hands upon his knees.

"Let me ask you a question, Harry," Harry looked up into the headmaster's eyes. "Who must do the hard things in life?"

Harry looked back down and shrugged his shoulders, not knowing. "Who?" he asked.

Dumbledore held his gaze for a moment. "He who can...."

Harry blinked as this sunk in. *He who can....* His life may have been riddled with pain and loss, but there was also some good in there worth fighting for. *I'm the only one that can ever truly defeat Voldemort... I'm the one who can.* It may seem an impossible, monumental task at one moment, but at another Harry realized that he was still alive after all these years. *And my power is growing* he thought. *But I can't control it... yet.*

His mind flicked back to the answer to Dumbledore's question. *He who can.* He was the one destiny had chosen to defeat the Dark Lord. If he failed or let all the pain beat him then the world may never be rid of him. Harry was certain of one thing; Voldemort was more magic than human. If he didn't kill him, he may just go on living forever, sinking the world into his own hell. *Well I'll be damned if I'm not going down without a fight...* thought Harry viciously, but at the same time saw the destruction and death of the previous few days, and he let fall a few more tears.

Life was hard, it was never easy, and there were no guarantees save one. As long as he lives, I can't. It all came back to a source, a single unchangeable fact that stared him hard in the face all day, every day. *Kill*

or be killed. Harry closed his eyes and saw the most painful moments in his life flash through his mind. The green flash of light that killed his mother, Cedric lying in that godforsaken graveyard, Sirius falling through the veil, and most recently, Ethan as he died in Abingdon. And at the end of it all stood one monster, smiling evilly at him in the shroud of darkness. Lord Voldemort. At that moment Harry felt that he could kill the creature without a moment's hesitation.

"Do you think I can, Professor?" whispered Harry.

Dumbledore nodded slowly, warmly. "You have chosen the right path in life, Harry, and are just now tapping into the power inside you. You learn to harness your power, and he won't be able to stand in your way...."

Harry frowned. "Do you truly believe that?" As he said this Harry felt a small tingle on the back of his neck, his magic was once again performing Legilimency of its own volition. *I'm going to have to learn control* he thought angrily.

"I have to believe it, Harry...." There was a desperate note in his voice, and Harry felt saddened by it. Dumbledore knew that he could never defeat him, and that it was up to Harry. There was also no trace of a lie.

Harry nodded, but then his thoughts turned to his other problems. "Professor," he began, not quite sure how to say this? "I'm... I'm worried..."

"Worried?" said Dumbledore, a frown of confusion upon his forehead.

"I'm -er- I'm scared actually," he whispered. "Scared of the power inside me, and how I can't control it properly, and sometimes not at all."

Dumbledore nodded and for a moment appeared thoughtful. "I believe it may be time to step up your magical education, Harry," he began, "what would you say to some personal training?"

"Personal training?" Harry wasn't sure what he meant by this.

"We can't hide from the fact anymore, Harry. You are going to have to kill him before this war can end. I know that sounds cruel and I'm sorry there is nothing I can do to change that, but I can help you prepare. There are

many people around the country and world that are highly trained in specific magical arts. With your approval, I think most of them would jump at the chance of teaching their skills to you."

Harry thought for a moment. This was exactly what he needed, finally. A chance to learn some really powerful magic, and harness his own. "When can we start?" he asked emotionlessly.

Dumbledore surveyed him for a moment. "You must understand, Harry. This training will be in every aspect of magic. It will be a long, hard journey. It's highly likely that you'll not be able to cope. It will also mean leaving normal classes-"

"What?"

Dumbledore blinked and tapped his fingers together. "You will have to leave your current year, leave behind all that Hogwarts can teach you, and learn from the best."

"But I'll be staying at the castle, right?"

Dumbledore smiled warmly. "Of course, Harry. But before you decide I must stress that it won't be easy. You will be learning magic far beyond your friends and classmates, you will be learning, Harry, to fight with an intent to kill."

Harry sat deep in thought; he wasn't sure how much time passed while he played over this idea in his mind. He would have to leave his normal lessons, his friends and learn different magic everyday. *Could I do that?* he asked himself, but then a more prominent question popped into his head; *Should I do it?* Harry answered that almost instantly. Yes... If he was to have any chance of winning this coming war, and freeing the world from Voldemort's grasp, then he had to do it.

"When can we start?" he whispered, determination in his voice and eyes.

"Soon," said Dumbledore, seriousness beyond anything Harry had ever heard in his voice. "I will have to make certain arrangements, but I believe everything could be ready for the first day of the new term."

Harry nodded. A feeling of acceptance seeping through his body. He was finally going to be doing something to help win the war. But he was leaving his friends behind in their lessons... *A price I'll have to pay* he thought. *I'll still see them at dinner and in the common room and on the weekends... We'll still be friends...*

"Thank you, sir," said Harry falling back into the present. "You always seem to know just what to say."

"The wisdom of age," smiled Dumbledore.

Harry nodded and then put a hand across his stomach as it emitted a low growl. He was hungry. "Go," said Dumbledore kindly. "This afternoon is Ethan's funeral, be ready at three," he said slowly, caringly.

"There's one more thing," said Harry quietly, but then hesitated as Dumbledore raised his eyebrows. Harry decided to just say it. "He knows the full prophecy."

Dumbledore's head snapped up quickly, the word forming on his lips instantly. "How?"

Harry sighed and cringed as he remembered the pain of the Legilimency spell Voldemort had used. "A spell," began Harry. "I couldn't resist it; he forced the words out of me."

It was Dumbledore's turn to sigh now. "This changes things. Voldemort will be consumed with killing you now, Harry. But since it is now known, I have an idea...."

Harry didn't say anything; he just looked questioningly into Dumbledore's eyes. "Arthur was here to see me about the current state of things before you arrived, Harry. There is a loss in the Ministry, in the country. People are getting scared at the coming darkness. They are joining him out of a profound fear that he is invincible and will eventually win his war. Voldemort is slowly hemming us into a corner."

"Yes...."

"What I'm suggesting is that we make the prophecy public, let the world know that there is a chance of defeating him, and that it rests with you. If

the people can see an end in sight, a hopeful end, then they won't all flee to him."

Harry was lost for something to say. On one hand the idea of everybody knowing he had to kill Voldemort was terrifying, on the other was the fact that the world not knowing was making Voldemort stronger, increasing his armies. In the end there was really only one choice. "Do it," he whispered, 'but wait a few days until I've told my friends. They have a right to know from me, and what's more I don't want them finding out in the *Prophet*.' Dumbledore silently agreed.

Without another word Harry stood up and with a final nod to Dumbledore walked out of his office, his thoughts a little less burdensome that they had been an hour ago, but now one more responsibility had been added to his list. He had to tell Ron and Hermione about the Prophecy.

Harry entered the Great Hall twenty minutes later, just on lunch time, and was greeted by absolute silence. There were several students from each house eating around one elongated table in the middle of the hall. There were also a few Professors on this table including McGonagall, Flitwick, Sinistra, and Madam Hooch. Also, Harry saw Mr. and Mrs. Granger. They all turned and stared at him as he entered.

"HARRY!" shouted Ron as he caught sight of him. "We were wondering were you got to, mate."

Harry smiled slightly, only slightly and began walking over to the table. As he approached it, everyone moved across slightly to allow him to sit in between Ron and Ginny, who was smiling kindly at him.

"How are you, mate?" asked Ron, passing Harry a spare plate.

"As well as to be expected," he said, buttering some bread.

Most of the people around the table had returned to their original conversations now, namely everyone but Harry's close friends. Hermione was staring at him nervously, as were her parents, and Ginny was still smiling warmly.

Harry sighed. "I'm fine everybody. Really," he said, seeing their disbelieving looks, "I am...."

"If you say so, Harry..." whispered Hermione. "Just know where here if you need to talk."

I do need to talk he thought. *Damn prophecy...* "Thanks," he said honestly to them all, taking a bite out of an apple. He saw that most of them still appeared worried, and that Mr. and Mrs. Granger were looking at him strangely. Was it admiration in their glances? Respect? Harry wasn't sure.

The conversation turned to lighter topics, but despite the warm feeling in the room, Ethan's funeral still hung over Harry's head and he couldn't appear happy, no matter how hard he tried. As everybody talked around him, Harry was just content to listen. He looked at each person in turn on the table and received a few warm smiles in return. At last his gaze settled on Ginny and an image of her helping him up the stairs flashed through his mind.

"Thank you, Ginny," he said and she turned to look at him, a confused look on her face.

"For what, Harry?" she asked brightly, for his sake.

"For helping me stay alive yesterday," he whispered. "For being there when I needed someone the most."

Ginny smiled nervously, it was obvious his words had had a profound affect on her. "You're welcome," she said, her eyes and face unreadable. "You're welcome, Harry."

After lunch Harry, Hermione, Ron, and Ginny traipsed back up through the castle and into the Gryffindor common room. It was deserted apart from them and Harry quickly fell back into one of the armchairs, his head throbbing slightly from the effort that was already that day.

"We should think about getting ready," said Hermione quietly. "We have to leave in an hour...."

Harry nodded and glanced at Ginny. She was coming to the funeral

she'd told him, said it was just Dumbledore and the four of them. Harry understood now, why Ginny had taken a dislike to Ethan when she first met him. He reminded her of Tom Riddle, and now that Harry thought about it he could see the resemblance. It was in his eyes, and his jaw structure, only a slight resemblance, but it was there. Harry sighed and stood up again. He needed a shower, shave and a change of clothes, so if he was going he had to get ready now. His friends did the same.

Half an hour later Harry walked slowly back into the common room. He was wearing his finest pair of black robes and had combed his hair as best he could. He was understandably nervous as one by one his friends came down to join him. It was two forty five when they were all in the common room and ready to go.

No one spoke as the clock ticked to two forty six and it was halfway around again before Harry did. "Let's go," he whispered. "I owe him this much," he ended muttering under his breath. Only Ginny, who was standing next to him, heard what he fully said.

Without another word the four of them began the walk down to the entrance hall. They were all dressed in black, appropriate for a funeral, and they all walked in silence. The only noise coming from the rustle of their clothing and their feet on the stone floor of the castle. It didn't take long to reach the entrance hall, and when they did Harry saw Dumbledore standing alone in the centre, his black robes hung loosely to his frame.

Harry thought Dumbledore looked odd, wearing black. He had only ever seen him in bright colours, it looked out of place. "Are we ready?" he asked the four of them, and in turn each of them nodded.

Dumbledore sighed with age old weariness, before turning on his heel and opening the great castle doors. The five of them stepped out into the cool December air. It was almost the New Year, but the snow was still heavy on the ground, and probably would remain for another month or so yet. Outside was a great black carriage, it could easily seat twelve people. It had big black wheels that spun across the axel gently and connected to the carriage structure itself. Harry saw that it was being pulled by six Thestrals.

As they walked towards it, Harry heard Hermione and Ron gasp at the same time. He turned to look at them and saw that their gaze was fixed on the Thestrals. It took Harry another moment to realise that they could see them, and then another moment to realise what that meant. They had seen death. *It must have been the other day* he thought. Ginny seemed to be the only one unable to see them, Harry saw Dumbledore glance at them briefly, before they all climbed into the carriage.

Inside the seats were made of fine leather, with two rows pointing both forward and behind. Harry took a seat in the back row, against the corner, and for the duration of the trip stared silently out of the window. Once the carriage set off nobody spoke. Ron and Hermione looked at each other awkwardly, and Ginny stared at Harry with concern. Dumbledore just looked sadly at the lot of them.

The carriage rocked down the snow covered drive way of the castle and onto the old road that led to Hogsmeade. Harry saw the bare trees, snow hanging from their branches, as they passed the bend in the road. Up ahead he could see the snowy village of Hogsmeade. The carriage rolled right up to the entrance of the high street, Harry saw a few shoppers here and there in the street, but then instead of turning down into it, the carriage carried on past the town Harry knew and into parts he'd never seen before.

Again there were snow covered trees, and he saw that up ahead the road curved around a slight hill and what was beyond that he couldn't tell. It wasn't long before they reached the bend, though, and Harry caught his breath at the sight before him.

It was a valley. The road stood just on the entrance to the valley and as of right now the carriage was descending into it. But it was what was in the valley that caught Harry's attention. Tombstones, endless rows of tombstones stretched as far as he could see. It took his breath away. The valley was long, and stretched onto the edge of the Forbidden forest which ran along its side as well. And covering it all were solitary grey tombstones, one after the other. They were impossible to count. Harry thought there may have been over one hundred thousand.

The valley was surrounded by hills and one mountain that Harry had

seen all the time from the castle. It was the one that the sun came over from the east first in the morning, casting the pale light of dawn upon the world. He had been wondering why he'd never seen this valley before and the answer was obvious. It couldn't be seen except from the road, and Harry had never been this far down the Hogsmeade road.

It was an amazing sight to behold, and he saw his friends awe struck faces as they too saw it, but in an instant Harry realised why he was here, and his mood fell again.

The carriage passed through a great stone arch that had words engraved across its band. They were in ancient runes and Harry couldn't read them. If he had been able to they would have said: *Thee Who Is Born Unto Death, Shall Know No Fear For He Is Born Unto Eternity*

Harry's nervous feeling increased as the carriage wound up the road built in the graveyard. They travelled passed endless lines of tombstones for what seemed like hours. Eventually they came to a slightly empty patch of the valley. It wasn't as heavily crowded as the rest and Harry saw a lone man standing with his hands crossed in front of him, silently next to a freshly dug grave. Hovering over the grave was a long wooden coffin with brass handles. In it lay Ethan.

It was like a dream to Harry. The five occupants of the carriage exited the vehicle and walked slowly over to the man next to the grave. As they walked Dumbledore told Harry that he was an Altera, the man who spoke at funerals just like a reverend. There was no set religion in the wizarding world, and an Altera covered them all.

Harry stood silently next to the coffin that held Ethan's body. A cool wind blew from up across the moor and down into the valley but Harry barely noticed it. The coffin was levitated a foot above the grave and as Harry beheld it, he felt tears in his eyes. The Altera began as the five of them took five silent positions around the coffin.

"We are gathered here today to mourn the passing of Ethan Rafe. I man of only sixteen years, who was taken from life unto death too early..."

He was Voldemort's son thought Harry. *But He was a good man....*

"He was born of magic and so shall die of magic. And return enriched with life's experiences to magic itself..."

Magic Harry thought bitterly. *No one should wield it...* He saw that Hermione was dabbing her eyes with a tissue, and Ron had his arm around her. Ginny had tears in her eyes, and Dumbledore looked extremely old and sad.

"He is welcomed into Death by those who have gone before. Into eternal life he goes, with the ties of mortal life severed and a magic broken...."

Harry let the tears fall now; he barely heard what the Altera said. All he knew was the pain and a profound sense of loss.

"We bid goodbye to our departed friend, Ethan Rafe." The coffin slowly began to lower itself into the ground, not a sound was heard except for the occasional sob from Hermione. Ron had tears in his eyes and Ginny did as well. A silent tear fell down Dumbledore's cheek.

Harry was only partly aware of the service before him. His mind was a wasteland of emotion, a destroyed plain where only emptiness remained. He was lost with nowhere to go; he had lost another friend to the monster he was bound to through magic and blood. Harry blinked and saw the world before him again. The Altera had stopped speaking and slowly the dirt around the grave was falling back in, through magic, sealing Ethan away for eternity.

Harry looked around and saw the final expressions of acceptance on the faces of his friends. They felt the pain, but not so much as Harry did. He looked from the grave, to the slightly visible coffin, and to the faces of everybody standing around it silently and he lost it.

With a cry he turned on his heel and ran. He didn't hear his friends and Dumbledore's pleas for him to stop; he didn't see where he was going. All he knew was that he had to outrun the pain, escape from it. He ran harder and faster than he had ever done before, deeper and deeper into the graveyard he went, passing by large and small tombstones alike. Soon he was lost to sight amongst the endless graves. For another two minutes he ran, not wanting the pain to catch him but knowing all the time it was still there inside him, just catching a ride as he ran. The effort

became too much for Harry and with a quick gasp for air he fell roughly to the ground, twirling as he went and landed hard with his back against a marble tombstone.

Harry wept, he wept for it all. Long held tears finally finding release from deep inside him. It had been an age since he'd truly cried; truly let the pain get out. And now it was free he couldn't stop it. Time had no meaning... it could have been mere seconds or long gruelling days; he didn't know or care. Every bad thing about his life came out in the form of tears and Harry simply let it. He was tired of putting on a brave face to the world. He had long since earned the right to cry.

Harry turned so he was kneeling in front of the tombstone he had fell against and he banged his fist against it roughly, ripping away the skin and causing it too bleed. Harry didn't feel it, his eyes were blinded with tears but as he blinked something became all too clear.

He saw the impossible right before him, the unbelievable. Of the hundreds of thousands of graves.... He blinked and cleared his eyes, hoping against hope that he wasn't hallucinating or dreaming. He wasn't. Staring him right in the face were two words engraved into the marble of the tombstone he had been throwing his fist against.

Lily Potter

A thousand emotions tore through Harry's being. Love, loss, pain, anger, confusion, closure, love again. It seemed impossible.... his mother's grave. Just one in a sea of thousands and he'd landed against it. It had to be more than coincidence, it was like Fate.

Harry placed his hands around the marble and held it as if it were all he had in the world. There was some snow upon on it that he cleared away with a wave of his hand and he read the full inscription.

<i>Lily</i>	<i>Potter</i>
<i>March 6th 1960 - October 31st 1981</i>	
<i>A</i>	<i>Sacrifice</i>
<i>It will not be forgotten</i>	<i>Beyond</i>
	<i>All</i>
	<i>Others</i>

Harry felt tears again in his eyes, but these were not tears of pain.... they

were that of love. *Why had no one brought me here before?* he wondered, but forgot it a moment later as he looked at the next grave over.

James **Potter**
August 5th 1960 - October 31st 1981

Beloved **Husband** **and** **Father**
A tireless fighter in the First Dark War

Harry moved across the snow covered ground, not feeling the cold and touched the grave of his father. It was a strange feeling to be kneeling in the snow on this day of Fate, closer to his parents than he had ever been in fifteen years.

Again time lost its meaning and Harry saw different things in his mind. He saw the photos of his parents that he had used to own, before they were lost in the destruction of Privet Drive, he saw them in the Mirror of Erised, and finally he saw the green flash of light that ended their lives, he heard their final screams in his head. His thoughts turned to anger.

"WHY," he screamed, the tears rolling anew, "WHY DID YOU HAVE TO DIE? WHY DID YOU LEAVE ME WITH HIM?" Harry pounded and thumped against the tombstone of his father, crying and screaming at the unfairness of it all. It was a long time before he realised, that he wasn't alone.

"Harry...." said a gentle voice behind him, he recognised it instantly.

"Go away, Ginny," he said emotionlessly. His face was a mask of pain.

Ginny shook her head, although Harry was facing the grave, he didn't see her. "I can't. You need someone with you...."

"Fine," he growled, but rose as he did so. He wasn't agreeing with her though. "Apyraceus!" Harry Apparated away, leaving a very shocked Ginny Weasley alone in the middle of the cemetery. Her eyes full of tears as she beheld the two graves before her.

"Oh... Harry...." she cried.

Chapter 18 - To the End

While there's life, there's hope!

--Ancient Roman Saying

Ginny shook her head, although Harry was facing the grave, he didn't see her. "I can't. You need someone with you...."

"Fine," he growled, but rose as he did so. He wasn't agreeing with her though. "Apyraceus!" Harry Apparated away, leaving a very shocked Ginny Weasley alone in the middle of the cemetery. Her eyes full of tears as she beheld the two graves before her.

"Oh... Harry...." she cried.

Harry didn't Apparate very far, not very far at all. He reappeared instantly two and a half miles away at the gates of Hogwarts castle. The grief still fresh in his mind, he collapsed to the icy ground, the rest of the world cold around him. It felt as if he was wrapped in an endless blanket of snow, a Dementor's cloak, an unhappy ending.

There are no happy endings....

Kneeling in the snow, burning tears flowing freely and his breath coming in short desperate gasps, Harry remembered telling Dumbledore that just before Christmas. *No happy endings...* He could see it; see it in its starkest clarity. No matter how hard he fought this war, people are going to die, and he was helpless to stop it. *Too weak* he thought. *Not strong enough to face him....* And while he waited, lives were lost.

It took Harry his all to get back to his feet and slowly walk up the path to the castle. He briefly remembered doing the same thing yesterday, though his condition had been worse then. Tears silently fell the whole way. *Mum... Dad...* His parents graves, lost in a sea of others, hundreds upon thousands of others, and he had found them purely by chance. If it

could be called chance?

Harry cried for it all. Alone in the snow strewn landscape around him and the world seemed bitter, unforgiving... cruel. But despite all that Harry felt a sense of closure. He'd seen his parent's final resting place. It was true he'd found grief there, but there was also the finality that came with that. *And Ginny* he thought *she was only trying to help....*

Harry entered the castle and walked absently through its ancient halls. For the most part it was deserted, but once or twice a student or professor who had remained at the castle passed him. The students of the younger years rushed by him, casting awe struck glances over their shoulders and whispering furiously to each other. The professors were more caring towards him. Flitwick stopped him along the east corridor on the second floor and asked if he'd like to come to his office for tea. Harry declined, saying he was too tired. And in truth he was.

His thoughts took him all the way to Gryffindor tower. He was the only one there, thankfully, and he slowly limped up to the dormitory. Harry collapsed onto his bed with a heavy sigh. It had only been a few hours since he had awoken in the hospital, and it all took its toll. With his thoughts of grief and death clouding his mind, Harry rolled over and drew the curtains around his bed, and with a final tear falling to his pillow, sleep took him.

It crackled, radiated with pure power. Harry saw the images of a thousand worlds flicker by in quick succession. The circle tore through the very fabric of the air around it, sucking that into its gaping, ever-growing hole as well.

Harry watched it with an almost eerie calm. And why shouldn't he? This same nightmare had haunted him for months now; he was too used to it. The slaughtered men lay around the edge of a stone dais, only this time Harry recognised a few of them. They were Death Eater's. And across the stone, standing tall against the darkness was the Dark Lord Voldemort. He heard the insane laughter and then...

The nightmare shifted, and Harry found himself looking upon another stone dais. A dais he knew very well. He watched helplessly, for what must have been the millionth time, as Sirius fell with an almost smooth

like grace through the veil. He saw clearly the small shock on his godfather's wasted face before it was lost beyond to death. And standing triumphant against the veil was Bellatrix Lestrange....

Another shift and this time Harry was looking into Cedric's cold dead eyes. He barely had time to feel anything before a third shift sent him back to the horror of the street, and looking down now into Ethan's lifeless eyes.

It was then that Harry felt so alone in the world that all the nightmares ceased, and there was nothing but a cold blackness in his mind. He saw himself, floating above his own body which was holding his mother's grave for dear life. It made for a pitiful sight he thought as he watched himself cry against a piece of cool marble.

And then in the background he saw a lone figure standing on the edge of the darkness. It was Ginny. She was wiping away a tear as she watched him from a distance. Harry felt unexplainably saddened by this, and he longed to reach out and grab her, tell her everything was all right, that he'd be fine... like he always was.

But a final shift showed him alone at the gravestones of his parents, again Harry was holding on to his mother's marble tombstone for all he was worth. And then something different happened. The grave shimmered and Harry fell forward and into the arms of his mother. He was stunned. The gravestone had disappeared, leaving a very real image of his mother in its place. Harry struggled to comprehend it all, to make some sense of it, but in the end he just gave in and cried. His mother smiled knowingly, her own emerald green eyes glistening with tears, and wrapped her arms around him whilst he cried into her shoulder. Harry had never felt so happy in his entire life.

"He's been asleep for hours."

"I love you, mum..." cried Harry.

"Wake up, Harry!"

"I love you too, Harry," came the only words Harry had ever really wanted to hear. "But you have to wake up, dear. It's not yet time to

rest...."

Harry pulled away and looked sadly into his mother's eyes. "I know... but I'm so tired."

Lily Potter smiled sadly, grief and pain now in her eyes, mixed with love. "You have to stay strong, Harry. I am sorry for this," she said, her hand briefly tracing his scar, "but you must trust Albus now. He will help you prepare..."

"Something's wrong. He should wake up," said a very anxious voice.

Harry blinked away the tears, and stared finally into his mother's eyes. "It's time I let it all out," he said, seemingly talking to himself, but his mother nodded. "I love you, Mum."

"I love you, Harry," she said a final time.

Harry blinked away the sleep in his eyes and opened them fully against the waking world. The first thing he saw was a familiar face, but that wasn't what he cared about now. *Mum* he thought, *was it just a dream? No.... I never have happy dreams, this was something else.*

"Harry? Are you okay?" asked Hermione from the edge of his bed.

Harry sighed, rubbed his eyes, and sat up in bed really quickly. He looked around and saw Hermione, Ron, and Ginny standing to the front and left of his bed. He yawned and pushed his hand through his hair, scuffing it up. "What time is it?" he asked.

"Nine in the morning," said Hermione. "You've been asleep right through yesterday afternoon and last night."

Harry nodded, not really surprised. He had been tired. *Mum* he thought again, lost once more in his own thoughts.

"Is everything okay, Harry?" asked Ginny nervously. She had told Ron and Hermione about where she had found Harry in the graveyard, they had been equally worried.

Harry looked up, seeming to notice them for the first time. He stared deep into Ginny's eyes for what felt like hours, in reality it was only half a

minute. She asked again. "Are you okay?" The concern in her voice really touched Harry.

It's time he thought. *Better they find out from me...* "No...." he sighed, surprising them all.

"You always say 'yes' when we ask you that question, Mate," said Ron, grasping Hermione's hand.

"I do?" frowned Harry. "It doesn't matter. Look... there's something I haven't told anyone... that really should be told." A mixture of feelings assaulted Harry as it finally came to this. Apprehension, fear, excitement, and also release and acceptance. The prophecy revealed.

"What is it, Harry?" asked Hermione nervously.

Harry looked at her for a moment and then turned to look out of the window. The early morning beams of sunlight were streaming in and lighting the room, casting it in warmth. "I -er- I'm no sure where to start..." he stuttered.

"How about at the beginning?" whispered Ginny warmly.

Harry smiled slightly. "Okay..."

It was a lot easier to say than he had expected, but it still hurt to do. Harry watched his friend's faces change from surprise, to horror, acceptance, and then fear.

"And either must die at the hand of the other...." he said again, and Hermione raised a hand to her mouth and stifled a cry. Ron looked absolutely lost, and Ginny was grasping the bed frame so hard her knuckles were turning white. "Dumbledore heard it straight from Trelawney nearly seventeen years ago now. It was the prophecy lost at the Ministry, the prophecy I was born into and will probably die of...."

"Don't say that, Harry," whispered Hermione, her eyes full of tears. "No one can force you to fight... you don't have to.... you can't.... he'll kill you... it's not fair...."

Harry sighed. "I know it's not fair, but I accept it." Hermione fell onto

Ron's bed and Ron sat down next to her, with an arm across her shoulders for support. Ginny, meanwhile, sat on the edge of Harry's bed. "You sure this is you, Harry?" asked Ron with a desperate plea in his voice. "You sure it means you....?"

"It does," he said, tapping his scar, but thinking of Neville as he did. "Marked as his equal, born as the seventh month dies. It's me, Ron, It always has been. Why do you think we've been drawn together so often?"

Harry glanced at Ginny as he said this and he caught her unawares. She had the most profound sadness in her eyes, which were also glistening with tears. She had drawn her legs up and wrapped her arms around them, as if she was shielding herself from the world and its truths. Harry thanked her silently with his eyes for her concern. Ginny smiled warmly when she got the message.

"NO!" shouted Hermione angrily. "You can't be expected to fight him! You just can't. You're only sixteen for Christ sake!" Harry blinked in surprise; it wasn't like Hermione to swear. She continued. "You don't have to live up to this, Harry," she ended finally, with a shake in her voice. "You... don't."

Harry shook his head sadly. "We all know I do. If not for the fact that it is prophesized I have to do it, then for the fact that I'm the only one who can."

Ron, although he agreed with Hermione, nodded at what Harry said. "Really we always knew it would come down to this, didn't we..." he said sadly, looking at the floor with a sad acceptance. "It was always going to be you, mate. Deep down we all knew this, but nobody wanted to say it..."

Harry nodded. "Thanks, Ron," he whispered and then turned to Hermione, whose face was a storm of emotion. "Hermione," he began, she looked at him desperately with a heavy fear in her eyes, "Hermione, I need you to understand. This is my life. All of it, all of the paths walked through the danger, through the war, has been leading up to this one fight. Gryffindor vs. Slytherin, you said it yourself months ago. It has always been me, and will be to the end. Whatever happens then....?"

Hermione looked from Ron, to Ginny, and then finally to Harry. "Don't do it, Harry..." she whispered as a last desperate plea. "Don't accept it...."

Harry was slightly annoyed now, but he could see what Hermione was feeling. She cared, and that was something. "If truth be told I accepted it the moment I heard it. It was just the kill or be killed part that scared me. I have wanted to tell you, all of you," he added glancing at Ginny, "for months now, but it was safer for you not to know then...."

Ginny frowned. "And why is it safer to know now?" she asked.

Harry sighed. "Voldemort," a small twitch from both Ron and Ginny distracted Harry. "*Voldemort* knows the prophecy now, as you do. He used a curse to get it out of me back at your house, Hermione." Harry's face inadvertently twisted with the memory of that pain, but he corrected it quickly. "That means things are going to step up in the war now. Voldemort knows that I'll always stand in his way."

Ron looked helpless but determined; he tightened his grip around Hermione. "What can we do against him?"

Harry nodded at Ron. "Hogwart's is the safest place in the country. We have to make sure he and his spies stay out of it."

"How are we going to do that?" asked Ginny.

Harry looked at her and then jumped up out of his bed, holding his sore arm close to him as he did. "With the DA," he decided, but in truth he had been thinking about this for months.

"What?" asked Hermione.

Harry turned to look at them, and leaned against the bedside table as he did. "There are Death Eater sympathisers in the school, and most likely Death Eater's in training. I think we all know who I'm talking about."

"Malfoy," said Ron bitterly. No one argued with him.

"Amongst others," nodded Harry, rubbing his sore arm slightly, he'd slept on it wrong and it was throbbing. "That's why the DA needs to take a more active role around the school. I've been thinking about this for a

while and when everyone gets back from the holiday I'll arrange a meeting."

Ron, Ginny, and Hermione fell silent. Harry found it uncomfortable and he slipped back into his dream. *God it had seemed so real...* he thought, but shook his head to clear it. It was then that he remembered something, something important. "I'm also leaving Hogwart's-"

"WHAT!" screamed Hermione and Ginny loudly, both of them leaping to their feet.

"Let me finish," he whispered, and they sat back down. "I'm leaving my Hogwart's lessons. Dumbledore and I have decided that since it has to be me to kill him, there's no point sitting around doing nothing. Hogwarts can't teach me what I need to know, but the people Dumbledore is bringing into the school can."

Ron stood up, letting go of Hermione as he went. "They're coming to teach you how to fight to kill," he said emotionlessly.

Harry cringed, and looked away as Hermione and Ginny both realised this. "Yeah.... I'm going to learn so I can end this war. Its... it's the only way."

Ron, Hermione, and Ginny all stood now. Harry glanced at all of them and saw a steadfast determination in their eyes. He wasn't sure how they would react to all he'd told them, but inside he was glad he finally had... no matter how they accepted it.

It was Ginny that came over to him first, and enveloped him in a tight, love filled hug. Harry didn't know what to make of it? He felt happy, confused, and... warm. "We'll be there for you, Harry," she said, letting go of him. She looked him in the eyes and Harry saw the tears begin to stream down her face. Without realising what he was doing he raised his right hand and brushed away a single tear from her cheek. Ginny blushed slightly but before either could see anything; Hermione had enveloped him in another hug.

"We will, Harry. We'll stay with you until the end...." She was crying openly too.

Ron came next, and while Hermione was still hugging him, placed a friendly hand on his shoulder. "To the end, Harry. I'll be there to the end." A tear now fell down Ron's face.

Harry was overcome with emotion, but for the first time in days it didn't come with pain. It was the true, pure, clean emotion of love. "Thank you..." he whispered. "Thank you...."

The rest of the holiday break passed in a relative normality. Harry fell into a pattern of waking up at seven, showering and heading down to breakfast by eight, and then spending the rest of the day with his friends and the others in the castle. It felt unbelievably good to have the prophecy out in the open, and what's more to have it accepted by his friends. He actually felt happy at some moments, like it was in the old days, before the war.

Dumbledore had informed him at dinner yesterday evening that he had begun sending letters to the people around the globe that could help him. One had already replied and was on his way over from Ireland in three days, which was the Saturday before the new school term started. Dumbledore had told him it was a rather strange man named Dermal Trask, a close friend of Mundungus Fletcher, but he was excellent with close combat skills.

Harry had also given Dumbledore the go ahead to print the prophecy in the Prophet, with a full explanation of its meaning. If everything went to plan, Voldemort would not gain as many followers as he could without it going public. Harry felt it was a small price to pay in order to lessen Voldemort's army, which he had been told was in the region of three hundred and fifty.

The week passed quickly for Harry, who spent as much spare time as he had, mostly in the evenings, devising plans for the Defence Association. Ron and Hermione helped of course, but they didn't attack it as fiercely as Harry. He envisioned a network of people throughout the castle, who students could turn to for help, and also discover if anything was wrong.

Harry couldn't be sure, but he had a strong suspicion that the person or

persons that had abducted Padma those months ago had inside help. If he were to blame anyone it would be Malfoy. So when the new term started he'd begin fortifying Hogwarts against Voldemort and his Death Eater's.

Harry woke up later than usual on Saturday morning, the last weekend of the holidays, having stayed up late into the night finalising his plans for the DA, he was barely out of bed before he got the fright of his life. Ron was already up and out of bed, probably at breakfast, and Harry was alone in the dorm. It was then, when he'd just stepped out of bed, that a fireball exploded in the room by the door, it burst into flame with a loud pop, and out of it flew Fawkes the phoenix.

Harry jumped and fell back in surprise as the bird flew gracefully across the room to meet him. The red and golden phoenix landed gently on his leg and Harry relaxed slightly. "You scared me," he said, stroking the bird just below its neck, as the ball of fire across the room died.

Fawkes uttered a single warm note and Harry forgave him instantly, the music was calming. It was then that Harry noticed a long object wrapped in brown paper tied to Fawkes' leg. "For me?" he asked. The phoenix nodded and presented its leg.

Harry, with a frown of confusion, undid the tie around the bird's leg and removed the object. As soon as he felt it Harry realised what it was. He had missed it last week and had also, with the discovery of his parent's graves and telling his friends of the prophecy, completely forgotten about it. Sure enough when he undid the brown wrapping, Harry held Rafe's dagger in his hand. He smiled slightly and then remembered the promise made when he took this dagger from Ethan. *I'll try* he thought.

Harry looked down to the wrapping in his hand and on the inside of the brown paper was written a small note in Dumbledore's curvy script.

Harry,

This was taken from you last week while you were in hospital. I believe it only right you have it back.

Albus Dumbledore

Harry silently thanked Dumbledore and nodded his thanks to Fawkes, who, his job now done, flew back across the room and disappeared in another fireball. Harry never ceased to be amazed by the phoenix.

With a final look at the blade, Harry lifted the lid of his trunk and set the dagger on the top of his robes. "'I'll find a sheath for you later,' he said quietly, and turned on his heel.

After showering, shaving and putting on clean pair of clothes, his customary black jeans and shirt, Harry went down to the common room to find it deserted. He was the only one in Gryffindor tower. A quick glance at the clock on the wall told him it had just gone eight thirty. *Everybody should still be in the Great Hall* he thought, and began walking down to the hall at a quick pace. Outside the common room the early morning beams of sunlight were streaming in gracefully through the high windows, casting the corridors in light and warmth.

Harry walked quietly through the halls, which were empty just like the common room. As it happened whenever he was alone, Harry fell into his thoughts. His mother had lain heavily on his mind all week. *That dream was just too real...* he thought. *Was it possible I really talked to my mother...?* His thoughts continued like this until he reached the second floor landing.

Harry had just stepped off the moving staircase when there was a sudden sharp tingling sensation on the back of his neck. He stopped for a moment and raised a hand across his neck, and rubbed it lightly. The tingling ceased but Harry barely noticed, because it was at that moment that a lone figure emerged from the shadows to his left.

There was no time to react, no time to run, no time for anything. The masked figure leapt from the shadows with his arm raised. He wasn't carrying a wand, though; he had a long wooden stick, fashioned in the shape of a sword. It was about a metre in length and painted black. Harry ducked, just at the last moment and the stick wielding man's blow flew over his head.

Harry fell backwards in surprise at the speed in which he and his attacker had moved. The man, who was dressed in long flowing white robes with a white hood and mask, raised the 'sword' again to strike

Harry. There was more time to react now, and Harry, from the floor, flicked his right wrist and sent his wand flying into his hand from the hidden holster.

"Not good enough," shouted the man, in an accent Harry didn't have time to place.

Harry jumped to his feet just as another blow knocked the ground where he had been only mere seconds ago. A thousand thoughts were shooting through his head. One was that this man was no Death Eater, but he did intend to hurt him if he could. Another was the more prominent thought; *who the hell was he?* They were in a wide corridor just near the stairs, plenty of room to move and fight. Harry had jumped up with his back against the wall, and was now raising his wand as quickly as possible.

It was no good. The man whirled around, faster than a bolt of lightning, and threw his stick up, causing it to flip majestically; he caught it in his left hand deftly and in an instant cracked it against Harry's wrist.

"Argh!" cried Harry, dropping his wand and clenching his bruised wrist. This moment of pain was all the masked man needed to inflict more. He was incredibly fast. Without a moment's hesitation the man brought his stick across Harry's neck and thrust it across with ease and grace. He then, while Harry was just realising the loss of his wand, swung it around like a whip and hit Harry in the side as hard as he could.

This blow knocked Harry to the floor, but on the way down he got the message. *If that had been a real blade, I'd be dead....* Harry hit the floor hard. The impact knocked the wind out of him and he began gasping for breath desperately. The masked man didn't move, he surveyed Harry from behind the white of his mask for a few moments, before raising his 'sword' above his head.

Harry saw it coming, saw the glint in the man's eyes through the slit in the mask. With a cry he brought the sword crashing down with the full force of his strength. It took Harry a moment to realise that he might not get back up from this blow. The stick cut through the air and, while coughing heavily, Harry raised his left arm in defence.

His arm had fully healed over the week, thanks to Madam Pomfrey's potions. It still felt a little numb from time to time, but that was to be expected considering the bone had been thrust out of his flesh. The man continued his cry as the black wooden stick tore through the air above him. At the last moment an idea came to Harry, and with his arm raised he closed his eyes.

There was a soft slicing sound and Harry opened his eyes just in time to see the man's stick fall away in two separate pieces. One of them fell to the floor harmlessly, clunking loudly against the stone; the other remained in the man's hand, who Harry heard was now laughing behind his mask. And grasped strongly in Harry's left hand, was his sword, the sword of Gryffindor. He'd called for it just at the last moment, and the infinitely sharp blade had cut through the man's wooden stick with ease.

Harry was still gasping for breath and trying to make sense of the situation as the masked man removed his mask. He was still laughing as he dropped it to the floor and revealed his face for the first time. The man had short, curly, brown hair. It was very messy and obviously not cared for, though this probably didn't bother him. He had piercing, sharp, blue eyes that at the moment were full of laughter. His face was covered with thick stubble, almost a beard, he hadn't shaved in awhile, and Harry could just make out a long, deep scar on his right cheek through the stubble. As he laughed Harry saw that he was missing several teeth, and that the ones he did have were slightly yellow. The man was laughing so hard that tears began to form in his eyes and he leaned against the wall to steady himself.

Harry was highly annoyed and confused. As he struggled to catch his breath the man extended a rough hand to him down on the floor, but Harry raised his blade in defence. The man laughed again.

"Oh! Put that away, Potter" he laughed, reaching for Harry's empty right hand. With a slight heave the man lifted Harry to his feet. Harry recognised the accent now; this man was Irish. And with that, suddenly all the pieces fell into place. Harry put away the sword of Gryffindor with a thought, and rubbed his wrist, it hurt.

"I suppose you're wondering who the hell I am? Aye, Potter?" the man

said with a slight chuckle.

Harry nodded. "Are you Dermas Trask?" he asked.

The man nodded now. "Very good, Potter. You may not have any skill with a blade, but at least my blows knocked some sense into yer'," he joked, laughing again.

Harry began to calm down now; he was breathing normally and coming down off the adrenalin of the fight. This was the man Dumbledore had asked to help him learn some combat skills. Harry didn't know why, especially since he'd just been hurt by this man, but he took a strong liking to him from the start.

"You're lucky I didn't get a spell off," Harry said, raising his hand and summoning his wand back to the holster from down the hall.

Dermas looked him up and down for a moment. "Aye, you're probably right there, son. I've heard about yer 'special' magic. Lucky for me I nearly broke your wrist." He began laughing again, and despite the pain in his wrist, Harry laughed too.

"Well, it's nice to meet you," said Harry, extending his hand.

Trask looked at it but then a smile spread across his face and instead of taking his hand, he wrapped his arms around Harry and enveloped him in a bone crushing hug. "Nice to meet you too, Potter."

Dermas then let go quickly and this caused Harry to stumble where he was standing, he was laughing the whole time. "You're strange," said Harry shaking his head with a slight laugh.

"Strange?" Dermas said, feigning offence. "I'm not strange, mate. I'm Irish!"

Harry laughed at this one. It was obvious that Dermas was indeed a friend of Mundungus Fletcher. They were both fun to be around, slightly crazy, and smelt faintly of cigarettes and beer. "Mr. Trask-" began Harry, but stopped as Dermas exploded with laughter again.

"Call me Dermas or Trask, Potter," he said, running a hand through his

hair.

"Er... okay, Dermas. What was all that back there?"

"Hmm? Oh, that. That was just for me. To see how much work I've put myself in for. Looks like I'm gonna be here awhile," He began laughing again. "Nah I'm just kidding, Potter. Two, three months with me and you won't even know yourself."

Dermas slapped Harry on the back and then truly shook his hand this time. "It's an honour, Harry..." That was the first time he'd called him Harry. "It's an honour to help you with what you have to do." This was the most serious Harry had seen him in the ten minutes they'd known each other, and that included the fight.

Harry nodded just as seriously and shook Trask's hand back. "Thank you," he said, although he was a little confused. *What did he mean? Could he know about the prophecy?* Then Harry realised. The Prophet must have printed the article on the prophecy. The whole world would know. *It must have been in the morning edition of the paper* he thought. "Thanks, Dermas," he said again, though absently this time, he was lost in his thoughts, looking at the floor. It wasn't until Harry actually looked up that he realised Trask had left. He looked quickly up and down the hall, no sign of him. *Didn't even see him go....* thought Harry. *Wonder if he'll teach me how to do that?*

Having decided that the events of the past quarter of an hour were highly strange, Harry continued on down to the Great Hall. His wrist, and his left side hurt slightly as he walked down the entrance hall steps, but it wasn't overly painful. It would bruise, but that was about it.

Harry pushed open the old creaking wooden door and entered the Great Hall. As it had been for the holidays, there was only one circular table in the centre of the room. As Harry walked he saw that, Ginny, Ron, Hermione, Professor's McGonagall and Flitwick, and three Ravenclaw fifth years were seated at it.

"Morning," he said to the table in general, holding his side as he sat down next to Ginny.

There were a few scattered replies to his greeting and Harry frowned in confusion. He glanced across the table to see the Ravenclaw girls turn away quickly, they had been watching him. He turned to McGonagall and found her looking at him with a profound sadness, mingled with respect. It surprised Harry; she was usually very guarded with her emotions.

Since he'd sat down conversation had ceased, and there were now only hushed whispers coming from the Ravenclaw girls. "Em... what's going on?" he whispered so only Ginny would hear.

She turned to look at him and for a moment he saw the fear in her eyes, but almost instantly she smiled warmly. "It's the Prophet," she whispered back. "They've printed it...."

Harry nodded, he had expected as much. It certainly explained the behaviour of the table. Ron and Hermione were smiling encouragingly at him, and he thanked them silently. He had just pulled a plate of toast towards himself when Ginny handed him a copy of the Prophet. With a slight tense, nervous feeling in his stomach, Harry unfolded the paper, and took in the headline.

HARRY POTTER'S PROPHECY REVEALED
by Ian Lighterman

With recent developments in the Dark War, many people believe that all may be lost, and we are just awaiting the inevitable. The tragic loss of so many lives in Diagon Alley, the loss of Cornelius Fudge, a spate of Ministry disappearances, a terrible attack on Muggles in Abingdon, all the beginnings of what promises to be an unbearably time in our lives, and all brought back to He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.

The fear and terror of our world, the Dark Lord with a seemingly immortality. The horror of war, and our enemy. A man no one has ever stood up against and defeated, save one. Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived, rid the world of You-Know-Who fifteen and a half years ago. We rejoiced, we were free, we rose our glasses to Harry Potter. Everyone knows the story, but only a few have ever known the truth.

You-Know-Who was never truly defeated, he returned to make his war,

to finish what he started, to sink our world back into his darkness. We are sinking now, faster than we were sixteen years ago, with no end in sight all hope may be lost.... maybe? No matter how dark it becomes, there is always a light to guide the world to freedom. This Daily Prophet reporter can now, in total honesty, report that hope remains. That a light does indeed shine through, and that light is none other than the Boy Who Lived:

'The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches ... born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies ... and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not ... and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives ... the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies ...'

A prophecy, brought on by fate, brought to us to give hope for a better world. Harry Potter is the one with the power to defeat the Dark Lord. Marked as his equal, the famous lightning bolt scar that nearly killed both Potter and You-Know-Who that Halloween night so many years ago. He has once again been called upon to fulfil his destiny, the prophecy, and the prayers of all the free wizarding folk in the world go with him.

This enormous task may seem impossible to a boy of only sixteen years, but Harry Potter has proved his worth time and time again. Winner of the Triwizard Tournament two years ago, a lone voice in the denial of You-Know-Who's resurrection, and a boy who has lost so much in his short life. It has been discovered that Potter may have been the one to single handily capture twenty Death Eater's in the Abingdon street disaster on Boxing Day. Potter has mastered several difficult spells that many wizards find tricky. Spells such as the Patronus Charm. He is a powerful wizard for his age.

Whether or not Harry Potter has the will to defeat You-Know-Who, or whether or not you believe in this prophecy, one fact is certain. The world already owes Harry Potter for thirteen years of peace; can we truly call on him again? In the end that decision rests with Potter himself.

No matter what path you choose, the world thanks you Harry Potter for your undying courage in the face of evil. We will stand by and help you in

any way necessary, to see this war end.

Page 2 The First Dark War
Page 4 Harry Potter, a Brief History
Page 5 The Second Dark War

Harry put the paper down, unsure of what to think. The world now knew the prophecy, now knew his fate. *No matter what path you choose...* Harry inwardly cringed at that part. He only had one path. He couldn't live until Voldemort was dead, and the war couldn't end until he fought Voldemort, one way or the other. Harry felt trapped... a prisoner of his own life. There was no choice, he had to face Voldemort, whether it scared him or killed him he had to do it.

Harry looked down at the paper again and remembered why he had allowed it to go public. *To stop him...* he thought, closing his eyes as a single tear fell from one onto his cheek. There were several loud screeches from up above that knocked Harry out of his thoughts. He looked up to see about half a dozen owls circling the ceiling. Slowly, and quickly the birds fell one by one and landed in front of Harry.

The last one had barely landed before another three flew into the hall, followed again by six more. *Shit* he thought. *I should have expected this...* Harry stood up at the table and began pulling the letters from the bird's legs. If he removed the letters, then the birds themselves should leave. He pulled away five envelopes, and in turn five owls flew out of the hall, but they were replaced just as quickly with even more birds.

"Help me," he shouted to the table in general. Ron, Hermione, and Ginny immediately stood up as well and began removing the letters. It was a full ten minutes, and it had taken the help of everybody at the table, but in the end the owls were gone, and Harry was left with a pile of mail covering the circular table.

Ron was laughing at it all and Hermione was patting his back as, in his laughter, he had choked on a piece of toast. Ginny was smiling at him.

"I think, Mr. Potter," said Professor McGonagall from across the table, fighting another owl that had arrived for its letter, "that these may be for you."

"Extraordinary," beamed Professor Flitwick. "Never seen anything like it...."

"Nor have I," said a very amused voice from behind Harry.

Harry turned, as did his friends, and standing a few feet away were Albus Dumbledore, and Dermas Trask. "I think it may have had our desired effect, Harry," said Dumbledore, as Trask burst into laughter. Harry just nodded, and suppressed a smile. "Oh! Where are my manners? Harry, allow me to introduce-

"Dermas Trask," cut in Harry. "Yeah, we've already met this morning."

"Jesus, Potter I leave you alone for ten minutes and half the bloody owls in the country attack you," laughed Dermas.

Harry, and everyone else at the table, bar McGonagall, couldn't help but smile as Trask laughed. Harry felt that that man did more laughing than actually talking. "I'm going to have to get this out of the way," said Harry after a few more jokes at his expense. "I know what I'm doing all day now," he ended gesturing to the ever-growing pile of unopened mail on the table.

"Oh no you don't," said Trask quickly. "I wanna get my claws into yer before the other lot get here on Monday. Which means you get the privilege of my company all-day-long," smiled Dermas, a hand on his hip and a mischievous glint in his eyes.

"What?" asked Harry.

Dumbledore smiled. "Everyone I owled has agreed to come to Hogwart's and teach you, Harry," he said happily. "And from the looks of things, Dermas wishes to start right away."

"Damn right I do," Dermas laughed. "If I'm going to teach him anything then I've got to start now." Harry opened his mouth to protest. He had planned to spend today with his friends, and probably opening some of the mail, but Trask raised his hand and stopped him. "Smile, Potter. You're about to learn swordsmanship the Dermas Trask way." There was something in the way Trask said that that made Harry very nervous.

Harry had said goodbye to his friends, and they had generously offered to take all his mail back to the common room for him, he had quickly agreed and was now following Dermal Trask down the snow covered Hogwarts grounds towards the edge of the Lake. It was cold out, and Harry was cursing himself for not wearing a cloak this morning. Dermal was still wearing his white robes, which, now Harry looked, shimmered in a silvery wave as he moved.

His friends had wished him good luck; they did understand that this was something he had to do. *Learn to fight* he thought. *I'll try my best.* Dumbledore had also told him at the entrance to the castle before he and Trask had walked out, that on Monday there would be another six people arriving at the castle to teach him the skills he'd need. Harry didn't remember their names but he did remember what he would be learning. As they walked he recited the list in his head: *Offensive magic, Physical Combat, Charms & Healing, there was a man coming to teach Harry all that was known on the subject of wandless and pure magic. I'll also be learning Defensive magic, and... Magical tuning? Whatever that is?*

Harry wasn't sure what the last one was, magical tuning, but he'd probably find out on Monday. He fell out of his thoughts and found that he'd followed Trask all the way down to the edge of the frozen lake. He looked out across the expanse and saw the other edge, two miles away, and the trees over there covered with a new, untouched layer of snow. He turned to Trask, who was stretching his arm.

"Bugger, its cold," shouted Dermal, shaking his head and kicking the snow around his feet. "Right then," he said turning to Harry, and putting on a fake accent that sort of resembled a teacher. "Good day, Mr. Potter. Welcome to Trask Blades All Purpose Learning Course for Dummies. Now I have to go over our course outline before we can start, so bear with me... Course Aim number one, a student will learn how to use a sword and short blades. That's it. Any questions? No? Good. Then let's begin."

Harry laughed as Trask cracked his knuckles and the muscles in his

neck. He then turned back to Harry. "In all seriousness, Harry..."

There it was thought Harry. *He'd only known Dernas an hour, but already he could tell when he wasn't joking, he'd used his first name.*

"In all seriousness, Harry, this isn't going to be easy," Trask cracked a smile. "You're going to be put through your paces. I'm going to push you harder and harder until you are competent with that sword of yours. Understood? You may not make it, in fact I know you won't make it, I just think its better you know that now."

Harry nodded, not sure if Dernas was joking or not. "I understand," was all Harry said.

"Excellent," said Trask happily. "Then you can start with a ten mile jog around the lake, off you go. I'll be up at the castle in a warm bath reading my Muggle adult magazine when you're done."

"WHAT!" coughed Harry, as Trask exploded in laughter yet again.

"OH! You should have seen the look of horror upon your face. Don't worry, I was only kidding, it won't be me that makes you run around the lake. Wait 'til Monday when you meet Old Scrappy, he'll really make you run the lake."

Harry sighed with exasperation, you could never tell if this man was being serious or not. Also he didn't like the sound of 'Old Scrappy' whoever that was?

"Okay, Harry," began Trask, pulling a wand out of his robes pocket. "Let's get down to business." He waved his wand and uttered a small summoning charm. He followed Dernas' eyes to the forest and saw two thick sticks of wood come flying out from between the trees. They shot through the air and Trask caught them deftly, one in each hand. He'd put his wand away just a moment ago.

"Right, these will do," he whispered to himself, looking his pieces of wood up and down. He then sat down on the ground, putting the stick in his left hand on the ground next to him, and drew a long knife out of a sheath in his boot. He began to whittle away the wood with the knife. "Harry," he said, quickly cutting the wood here and there, his hands an

expert with the knife. "I want you to go get a shit load of firewood and start a fire down by the lake there," He pointed to an empty clearing by the lake's edge.

"Are you sure?" asked Harry, again not sure what was going on in Dermas' head.

"Damn straight I'm sure. You're going to feel the cold after a few hours out here. We'll need that fire." Harry could tell that this time he was being serious.

Harry walked about one hundred metres up the lake and came to the edge of the Forbidden forest. He stared into its dark eaves, listening to the rustling of the leaves caused by some unseen creature. He began to pick up the loose chunks of wood, and snapped branches that lay about only a metre into the forest. Once he'd picked up as much as he could carry, he walked back up the lake's edge and dumped the wood in a big pile near the edge of the frozen expanse. He was panting slightly from the lifting and the carrying, but he went back again and collected some more wood.

After about seven trips, Harry felt he had collected enough wood to last for most of the day. Just to be safe, he had summoned and levitated half a dead tree back from the forest. It was enough dead wood too last them. After digging a small hole in the ground, he had dug through the snow and reached the soil beneath; Harry placed a few logs, some branches and a load of dead leaves in the hole.

He wiped the sweat of his brow. *This was tiring* he thought. A quick glance over at Trask showed him that the man was still whittling the sticks. *What is he doing?* wondered Harry. *God knows?* he answered himself. Harry turned back to his hole full of wood and pointed his palm towards it.

"Incendio," he said calmly, and the flames shot out of his hand and took to the dry, dead wood immediately. Soon quite a flame had developed, and the snow near the fire had turned to slush. Harry sat down on the log he'd levitated over and rested. He watched the small pieces of ash get whisked up and away by the smoke of the fire, and felt his shoes warm near the flame.

After about five minutes he saw Trask rise and put his knife back in his boot sheath. He then picked up the two pieces of wood, and began walking towards him. "Nice job with the fire," he said, standing the other side of the flames with one hand on his hip, and the other holding the two whittled pieces of wood.

"What are the sticks for?" asked Harry. He was answered by another mischievous smile from Trask.

"Well, you see... GET READY!" Trask moved as fast as lightning, throwing one of the wooden sticks across the crackling flames. Harry only caught it on reflex.

Harry looked down at the stick in his hand and saw that it was shaped in the rough likeness of a sword. *Now it makes sense* thought Harry, but didn't think about it for long. He rose as Trask circled the fire. They faced each other for a moment, and then Trask charged, swinging his stick.

On instinct, Harry raised his stick in defence, but Dernas swung his stick and knocked Harry on the knuckles. He cried out but held on strongly to his stick. Another quick move and Trask knocked Harry across his ribs. Harry cried out again and stumbled back.

Not really thinking about what he was doing, Harry lunged forward, swinging his stick, but Dernas easily parried the blow. Again Harry came at him, aiming for his head but at the last moment twisted his arm and tried to hit his side. Dernas was laughing as he blocked the move with ease. "Nice try, Potter," he barked.

It carried on like this for a few moments, the sound of wood striking wood resounded around the clearing and over the fire. As they fought, Harry tried his best but couldn't block Trask if Trask wanted to hit him, which he did regularly. Suddenly, and with an unbelievable speed, Dernas' hands blurred and Harry felt the side of his head explode with pain. He collapsed to the ground.

Harry felt very dizzy, but the splash of cold water on his face roused him to alertness. He sat up shivering to see Trask standing over him, with a handful of the melted slush from around the fire. Harry blinked and felt the dried blood on the side of his head. "Ow... you didn't need to hit me

that hard," grumbled Harry angrily.

"Oh...? Oh I'm sorry, Princess. I thought that maybe a real enemy wouldn't soften his blows, and therefore I won't either. I told you it won't be easy, Harry. It's going to take time and a shit load of patience on my part. Now get back up, we try again." Trask threw him his stick and Harry rose to his feet. He was a little unsteady on them for a moment but it passed.

"Okay," he said.

They traded blows once more, but again Harry could only keep Trask at bay for one move. After a rather painful blow to his arm, Harry cringed and retreated around the fire, churning up the snow as he went.

"Good," commented Trask, as Harry inadvertently parried his blow. "Not so good," he said soon after as his stick connected with Harry's lower back.

"Is this how you treat all your students?" asked Harry angrily as his knuckles took another beating, and he fell back against the snow.

"Only the ones I like," said Trask. "And you're actually my first student in five years...."

"Really?" asked Harry, jumping away from Trask's stick.

"Yep. Came out of retirement as a favour to Dumbledore," he said, once more swinging his stick across the fire.

"Retirement? You can't be more than forty?" said Harry confused.

"I'm sixty seven, and I'll thank you to keep that under your hat."

Harry laughed, but was amazed at how young Trask looked. *Sixty seven* he thought. *He doesn't even have grey hair....*

"Enough talk. Come on, you're not getting hurt fast enough," laughed Trask, swinging his stick under Harry's leg and sending him down to the floor. Harry landed hard on his back.

The minutes of pain progressed into hours, and Harry felt saw to his very

bones. He didn't think Trask could be that deadly with a stick, he feared having to face him one day with a blade.

"That's it... no keep your arms in, and raise them a bit higher."

Slowly but surely Dernas taught him a few basic fighting stances, but no matter how hard he tried he couldn't hold Trask off for more than a few blows, and he ended up back on the snow covered ground.

"That's good, but do it again a lot slower."

As the morning passed into the afternoon, several more owls had descended upon Harry, and he now just threw there mail into a pile by the log. He had discovered one thing over the course of the day, that despite all the jokes and his laid back attitude, Dernas Trask was an excellent, probably unmatched, master with a sword. Harry was thankful he had someone so good to teach him this skill, though his thanks lessened as the bruises worsened across his body.

When the Sun began to sink into the west behind the castle, Trask finally called it a day. Harry collapsed against the wooden log and put his cold feet up against the fire. It was getting dark now and Harry could only see the castle because of the lights that dotted its windows. The fire seemed very warm and welcoming.

He hurt all over; Trask had not been gentle with his stick. He was now sitting down next to him, smoking from a pipe he'd produced from his robes and looking up at the stars. Harry was slightly annoyed at his laid back attitude right now; he hadn't hurt Dernas once and had only successfully parried his blows four consecutive times. He felt very useless with a sword.... and stick.

"I'll tell you, Harry," said Trask, taking a heavy breath from his pipe, "ain't nothing better than going for a ten mile jog around the lake after you finish getting the shit kicked out of you for nine hours." Trask gave him a lopsided look.

Harry laughed, despite the bruises all over his body, and warmed his hands near the flames. "What do you say we get up to the castle for dinner?" asked Harry, his stomach gave a particularly loud growl to

enforce his point.

Trask looked up to the castle. "Aye, all right, Harry."

Harry smiled and slowly, painfully, got to his feet. He collected the small pile of mail he'd received during the day, while Trask put out the fire. "I'll leave the sticks here," he said, placing them against the dead wooden log. "Remember, mines the one with all the dents in it," he laughed and punched Harry playfully on the arm.

With what little strength he had left, Harry smiled. He had only known Dermas Trask a single day, and in that day he had been beaten senseless by him time and time again, but despite that Harry couldn't help but feel, he had made a good friend.

Chapter 19 - A Marauder's Last Stand

Life is eternal and love is immortal; And death is only a horizon, And a horizon is nothing save the limit of our sight.

--Rossiter W. Raymond

Harry slowly opened his eyes to the world. He saw the faint lines of sunlight on his curtains and surmised it must be early in the morning. With a groan he yawned and rolled over. Crack, crack, crack, crack....

"Argh!" cried Harry as his limbs and joints protested at the sudden movement. He looked down to see his arms covered in bruises, and he felt too sore to even move. *Damn it Dermas...* he thought, silently cursing the blade master and his stick.

Harry lay in bed for a few more minutes, trying to fall back to sleep, hoping that when he woke up again his bruises wouldn't hurt so much. He heard the opening and closing of the dorm door from across the room and frowned. His curtains were drawn so he couldn't see what was going on, but he could hear Ron's snores to his left and he and Ron were the

only ones using the dorm.

He listened carefully to the approaching footsteps and quietly sat up in bed, his joints cracking again. Almost instantly after that the curtains across his bed were ripped open and sunlight poured viciously in. Harry closed his eyes tight against the light and turned away with a slight growl.

"Morning, Sunshine," shouted a very Irish voice.

"Trask?" groaned Harry, opening his eyes slowly against the light. "What the bloody hell you doing? It's only-"

"SUNRISE! I've been up jogging around the lake, and from now on you're going to be up at six on the dot, we have to get in a few hours of practice before breakfast. Come on!"

Harry only heard half of what Dernas said; he rolled over again and made a futile attempt to close the curtains.

"Not a chance in hell, Harry. Come on, you got fifteen minutes to shower and what not, and then I expect you down stairs."

There was a note of finality in Dernas' voice that Harry couldn't ignore. With a supreme effort Harry swung his legs over the edge of his bed, and pulled himself to his feet.

It was a struggle to get his aching limbs across the landing to the showers, but with much grumbling and cursing Harry managed it and as promised he was down stairs in fifteen minutes.

The pale light of dawn was shining in through the higher windows as Harry followed Dernas down through the castle. He went silent, as he wasn't looking forward to having his bruises bruised. Dernas whistled happily as the two of them exited the castle and began the short walk across the snow covered grounds over to the clearing by the lake, where they had fought yesterday.

"Fine morning," smiled Trask as he picked up his stick from the previous day and swung it absently, but professionally through the cold air.

Harry just mumbled a reply and half-heartedly picked up his stick. It felt cold in his hands, and as he thought this, snow began to lightly fall from the sky. He looked up and a flake landed on his glasses. He sighed and turned. "DEFEND YOURSELF," shouted Dermas.

Harry jumped and in an instant raised his stick, just as Dermas' came crashing down upon it. There was the resounding ring of wood hitting wood, and the training began. Two swift moves later and Harry was once again nursing his sore knuckles, which were rubbed raw and thanks to the previous blow, bleeding.

"Keep your arms up, and closer to your body. It'll give you more force to strike with..."

Harry did as Trask said and successfully, intentionally, parried his blow. *I did it* he thought. The early morning progressed as the Sun rose higher into the cloudy sky. The snow was still falling lightly when Harry was knocked to the floor for what felt like the hundredth time.

"A mistake that just cost you your life, Potter," said Trask, pausing to give Harry a moment to get up. "Keep your knees bent whenever you can, that'll give you more resistance against falling."

Harry nodded and bent his knees, only slightly, and they resumed training. Harry was a fast learner, always had been. The Patronus, all the spells and charms over the years, his quick thinking in battle. No one could argue he wasn't fast. Though no matter how hard he tried here, Trask always sidestepped him with ease and he ended up back on the snow.

It continued for two and a half hours. Harry would get back up, try again and end up back on the snow. As they went, Trask taught him different stances, and after Harry had taken a particularly nasty fall, he'd show him how to perform a certain move by doing it slowly. Harry could soon see that he would improve with time. *I've got months of this ahead of me...* he thought, but then immediately despaired as he realised the amount of bruises that were probably on their way. *And he's only one teacher* he moaned to himself.

"Enough," said Dermas eventually, and Harry dropped his stick to the

ground in relief. "Well done, Harry. You've got more determination than most."

Harry nodded his thanks and sat down on the nearby wooden log. As he did, an unfamiliar owl descended from the sky and landed softly on his shoulder. "Hello," he said quietly, raising a hand and stroking the bird's neck. "You after me?"

The owl hooted once and offered its leg to Harry. Attached to it was a small envelope. This envelope was of the purest black, and sealed with a crest that was somewhat familiar, but Harry couldn't place it. He removed the paper and with a final hoot the owl took flight again, back into the sky.

"More owls?" asked Dermal, sitting down next to Harry.

"It would appear so," replied Harry, breaking the wax seal and removing the thin sheet of parchment from within. After placing the envelope in his pocket, Harry unfolded the parchment with a mild curiosity.

*From the desk of Gorbag Gort
Head Goblin, Gringotts Wizarding Bank*

Dear Mr. Potter,

Please be aware that as of January 1st 1997...

Harry thought for a moment. The first day of the New Year had been four days ago. He continued with the letter, his confusion increasing.

...1997, the vault of the family Black has been legally transferred to you, as per the instructions in the will of the late Mr. Sirius Black.

Harry stopped and felt his heart catch in his chest. A million images of his godfather reeled through his mind in an instant and he gasped. *Sirius* he thought... *what have you done?* Harry had tried his best to overcome the grief and guilt of Sirius' death, he knew he had to be strong for the coming years, he knew Sirius wouldn't want him to grieve like he was, but how could he not? It was always there in the back of his mind, gnawing away at him when he was alone and had nothing to distract him from his thoughts. A silent tear fell, and he roughly pushed it away.

This life isn't fair... thought Harry for the countless time. *Every time I find something to hold on to it's ripped away...* Sirius. He was angry now, angry once more at life, and death. The anger began to stir and fester, he felt it bubbling in him like a poison. His magic responded and the faint crackles of lightning, of absolute power, began to stir across his skin.

"Harry-" began Dermas.

"Not now," he whispered, but the power in his voice was unmistakable.

Trask stopped talking and for the first time, had a glimpse of the power inside Harry. Trask saw the sparks of magic jumping across him.

Harry willed himself to calm down, commanded it. *There's nothing you can do about it* he told himself. *Just going to have to get over it... This is your life, accept it!* Harry breathed in heavily and slowly felt his magic relax, and after a moment it ceased altogether. With another deep breath and a heavy sigh, Harry continued reading the letter:

You're presence is required on the afternoon of Sunday the 5th at 12 noon for the transfer to be finalised, and for the assets to be divided. I'm sure you'll forgive the delay of this letter, Mr. Potter, as there was a large amount of funds to transfer and it took several days and many goblins.

Yours sincerely,

Gorbag
Head Goblin, Gringotts Wizarding Bank

Gort

Harry read the letter over again just to make sure he hadn't missed anything, and then folded the parchment in half and placed it in his pocket. *Sunday the 5th* he thought. *That's today.* He glanced at his watch and saw that it was coming up nine o'clock. *I'll get to breakfast and see Dumbledore...*

Harry and Dermas walked silently back up the grounds to the castle, which Harry thought was an achievement in itself because Trask hardly ever stopped talking. They entered the castle together just on nine o'clock and Harry immediately began walking towards the Great Hall. All the while he was thinking about Sirius.

He pushed open the wooden doors and walked in impressively. Everyone at the circular table looked up as he entered, and three of them saw the emotion in his eyes. Ron, Hermione, and Ginny were instantly worried. Also sitting at the table was Albus Dumbledore, Mr. and Mrs. Granger who were talking to Dumbledore, several other students who cast awe struck glances at Harry, which he ignored, and little Professor Flitwick, who was talking to Ginny.

Harry covered the distance to the table easily and walked around to its head where he took the empty seat next to Dumbledore. Trask came in unnoticed after him and sat down next to Ron. Dumbledore smiled happily as Harry sat down, but Harry didn't return the smile, and Dumbledore's fell.

"Is something the matter?" asked Dumbledore sincerely.

Harry sighed, aware that most at the table were listening. "It's this," he whispered, pulling the piece of parchment out of his pocket and handing it to Dumbledore.

Dumbledore took it with a frown and Harry gave him a moment to read it. "Ah!" he said and passed it back to Harry. "Sirius... I never knew he had arranged this," Dumbledore had a hint of amusement in his eyes.

Harry smiled slightly now, he realised that this was exactly something Sirius would do. He cared that much, it was touching. He was one of the few that did care. "This is something he'd want, though, isn't it?" Harry said after a moment of reflection, in which only happy memories surfaced.

"Indeed," replied Dumbledore, placing a hand on Harry's shoulder. "But is it something you want?"

Harry was stumped for a minute by the question. He looked around the table to see everyone in their own conversations. Ron and Trask were talking, and Ron was laughing heavily. Ginny and Flitwick were discussing Charms, the other student's were chatting amongst themselves, as were Mr. and Mrs. Granger. Hermione was the only one that caught his glance, but Harry ignored her questioning look.

Do I want this? he asked himself. *Why wouldn't I? If this was Sirius' wish then I'll respect that.* Suddenly, and viciously, Harry had an image of his godfather pass through his mind. It had looked like he was standing on something against the night sky and there was an extraordinary light behind him. With this image came a thought:

Nothing is Impossible!

Harry was sure he'd seen or heard this before. He had the feeling that he'd forgotten something, something important, and it had to do with Sirius. *What was it?* he asked himself furiously.

"Harry?" He lost it. As quickly as it had come it had gone again. He wouldn't remember now. "Have you decided?" asked Dumbledore.

Harry nodded. "Yes. I'll go this afternoon."

"Very good," smiled Dumbledore. "I'll have to arrange for some Order members to accompany you of course."

"How is Diagon Alley nowadays?" asked Harry. What he meant was, how was it after the attack, how had it recovered from that. Had it recovered?

A shadow passed over Dumbledore's eyes for a moment. "It is as busy as it ever was, but the fear is now there. Aurors guard it around the clock. I'm afraid it is no longer the friendly place it used to be."

Harry had expected as much. Diagon Alley was one of the cornerstones of magical Britain, it had been a sore blow to lose so many there. *Voldemort* he thought, *you have too much to answer for....* "When do I leave?" Harry asked eventually.

"I'll have to talk to Remus, Harry, but I'm sure we can arrange a floo for eleven thirty."

Harry nodded. "Professor? Did he know about the prophecy?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "Only you and I knew about it up until Christmas, Harry. It was safer that way."

Harry sighed. "So he found out in the Prophet?"

"No. I arranged a meeting of the Order before it was released. They found out the full prophecy from me."

Well that's something thought Harry. He didn't want Remus finding it out in the paper. With a plan arranged Harry pulled a few pieces of toast towards himself and began to butter them. He wasn't completely sure how he felt about this? Sirius had been like a father to him, and, like his real father, had died, apparently leaving him some money. Quite a lot of money from what it had said in the letter.

After breakfast Harry joined Ron, Hermione, and Ginny on the way to the library. He wanted to make sure that no matter how busy his training got, there'd still be time for his friends. Ginny and Hermione had walked ahead a bit, leaving Harry with Ron.

"You met Dementors then?" asked Harry.

Ron smiled and then laughed slightly. "Oh yeah! A lot like Mundungus isn't he."

"Except he's useful," joked Harry. "And absolutely lethal with a stick."

"I can tell. Have you even seen the bruises on your arms?"

Harry groaned. "I've got months of this..."

Ron smiled and patted him on the back. "You'll get better with time. Now what were you and Dumbledore talking about?"

"I've got to go to London this afternoon. Remus is coming with me to Gringotts... here, read this." Harry passed Ron the Gringotts letter.

It took Ron a moment to read it, and then he passed it back to Harry, a concerned expression on his face. "Are you all right about this, mate?"

Harry smiled at Ron's concern, it was genuine and that mattered. "I'm fine. I've had enough time to get to grips with his death...." That was partially true, the grief and guilt still assaulted him in his dreams, but he accepted that Sirius was gone.

Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny were the only ones in the library, apart from the old vulture-like librarian Madam Pince. Before they had left the

hall, Derris had given Harry a slip of parchment with the name of a book he wanted him to read. Apparently it would help him with his training. So it was that Harry was deep in the stacks of the library, searching for the biography of Godric Gryffindor. It didn't take him long to find it, as it was in a section of its own entirely devoted to the history of Hogwarts and its founders.

After picking up the book, Harry walked back through the library and across to the table by the window, where his friends were sitting.

"I don't think it really matters, Ron," Hermione was saying as he sat down.

"What's that?" asked Harry.

"Whether or not you can still play Quidditch," answered Ron.

Harry frowned, he hadn't thought of that. Leaving his regular classes... did that mean no more Quidditch? No.... "I'm still a Gryffindor," he said thoughtfully. "I still live in the castle. It's really just as if I'm taking different lessons than the rest of you...." He wasn't so sure, but he'd ask McGonagall later. "Anyway if I'm not, Ginny could always be Seeker," he added, smiling at Ginny who blushed ever so slightly.

"We're also down one Beater," said Ron quietly.

Harry sighed and nodded silently, twirling his ring around on the tip of his finger. "I don't think we should replace Ethan, you know, as a mark of respect...."

"That's nice," whispered Hermione, smiling warmly.

There was silence at the table for a moment and Harry traced his finger across the image of the Phoenix on the cover of his book. He looked at it and noticed that it bore a striking resemblance to Fawkes, but the thought slipped his mind a moment later when the conversation started up again.

They stayed in the library for another hour, at the end of which Harry checked his book out with Madam Pince, who seemed to be a lot nicer towards him than usual. *Maybe because of the prophecy* thought Harry.

And that's another thing, there's still all that unopened mail up in the dorm... It can wait until tonight.

Harry had to be at Dumbledore's office for eleven thirty, and it was ten thirty now. He thought it probably best if he went and showered, shaved, and put on some nice robes before going to the bank; it was a formal occasion after all. So he bade goodbye to his friends at the base of the stairs in the common room, and went to get ready.

After showering, Harry put on his black jeans and t-shirt, and then went back across the landing to the dorm. He picked out his nicest pair of black robes, and pulled them over his head. He realised with a start that it had just gone eleven.

"What do you think?" he asked the mirror on the wardrobe, whilst making a vain attempt to flatten his hair.

"Very dark and strong," it said. "Just give up on the hair."

Harry smiled slightly. He supposed he did look slightly strong. A combination of the robes, and the recent scars on his face from the shrapnel, did give him a certain look. *Almost the part of the hero* he thought sadly, shaking his head. *Almost...*

Down in the common room he discovered his friends had gone on somewhere else. *I'll have to make sure to spend more time with them* he thought as he exited through the portrait hole. *Make sure I don't get too caught up in everything...*

As Harry walked through the quiet, empty corridors of the castle, he thought of all the good memories of Sirius that he had. They weren't many, but he was happy with the few he had. Like the one where he was escaping the castle, flying to freedom in third year or the time he'd come to watch him play Quidditch as Snuffles. His eyes misted over slightly as the cold realisation hit home that those times would never be again, not in this world....

His thoughts had taken him all the way to Dumbledore's office. Thankfully the gargoyle was up, so he didn't have to waste any more time guessing the password. It was coming up for eleven thirty. Harry

ascended the stairs slowly, wiping his eyes as he did. *No tears* he thought. *It's better not to make anybody worry...*

The door to the office was also open and Harry could see two friendly, familiar faces within. He walked through the door and smiled. "Hello, Remus," he said.

"Harry," smiled Remus, walking over and placing a hand on his shoulder. "How have you been?" It was an everyday question, but Harry could tell from the concern in his eyes, and the strength of his grip, that Remus was undoubtedly concerned.

"I'm fine," he replied automatically and Remus nodded. Now that Harry stood closer to Lupin, he thought that the man had never looked so... old. His hair was several shades closer to grey and the rings around his eyes were extremely visible. *When was the last full moon?* Harry thought, wondering if it could have been even last night. That said Remus was wearing a clean pair of robes of a dark green colour. They weren't patched or frayed like his usual ones.

"You sure you're doing all right? I mean... with the Prophecy and all?"

Remus' concern was touching, but slightly annoying. "Yeah... don't... don't worry," Harry said this sadly, but with enough force that Remus got the message. Stop asking! Harry didn't see the look that passed between Lupin and Dumbledore.

"Well if you're ready then, Harry," began Dumbledore, offering him a pinch of floo from a bag. Harry took some, as did Remus. "Take care," he said finally, with the slightest of nods to Remus.

Harry stepped into the fireplace. "Goodbye, Professor," he said, and smiled slightly at Dumbledore. "Diagon Alley!" Harry braced himself for floo travel and pulled his arms in towards his chest. He closed his eyes tight against the blur of colour and made ready to fall out when he heard a deafening roar. Out on the other side, he stumbled but didn't fall, and with a shake of his head to get the soot out of his hair, Harry looked up and around The Leaky Cauldron. As it was still the morning, the pub was practically empty, and no one took much notice of the fireplace anyway.

A moment later, and he moved out of the way of the fireplace, Remus came spinning into the pub as well. He managed to step gracefully from the flames and onto the floor, and seemed to be covered in very little soot. "How do you do that?" asked Harry, waving his wand across his robes, clearing them of soot.

"What?"

"Land without falling and manage to come out with hardly any soot," said Harry.

Remus smiled. "Oh! Well... it just sort of comes with age, you'll figure it out. It's all about how you hold yourself when travelling."

Harry shook his head. "Shall we get going?"

"Hmm..." agreed Remus, but with a thoughtful look in his eyes. "You'll find Diagon Alley isn't what it was, Harry. Just stay close to me, and try not to draw too much attention to yourself."

Easy said than done he thought, trying to flatten his fringe against his scar but to no avail. He noticed as they walked through the pub that Tom, the publican, nodded to Remus and then to him. Thankfully he had the sense not to shout his name in greeting. Harry and Lupin exited through the back door and stepped out into the cool London air. It was then that Harry saw how much Diagon Alley had really changed.

The cobblestone wall that guarded it's entrance, and the trashcans that made it appear as nothing more than a back alley, were gone, to be replaced by a strong iron gate, through which some of the street could be viewed. It stretched up and along the wall, effectively barring the entrance. But that wasn't the only new addition. Stationed behind a wooden desk, which was connected to the wall as well, were two men. One was seated and the other was standing with his wand drawn at Harry and Lupin.

With a thought Harry called for his wand from the holster on his arm and had it in his hand an instant later. The man at the gate tensed, his eyes hardening. Lupin put a hand on Harry's shoulder. "They're Aurors," he said, walking over to the small desk as Harry returned his wand to the

holster. The other man kept his wand trained on the two of them.

Harry and Lupin approached what Harry now realised was a guard desk. "Name and business?" said the Auror that was seated, poising a quill on some parchment which already had a few names on it. He looked up slightly as he said this, and Harry saw his eyes flicker momentarily to his forehead.

"Remus Lupin," said Lupin. "Going to Gringotts."

The Auror scribbled this down and then turned to look at Harry. "Well?" he asked, his tone a bit rough.

Harry frowned, not at all liking the man. "Harry Potter," he said, and the quill in the man's hand jumped slightly on the page. The Auror standing behind him almost lost his grip on his wand. "Also going to Gringotts...." As Harry said this he looked at his watch, it was almost noon, he didn't want to be late.

"Very good," nodded the man, reaching into a box under the table and pulling out two small pieces of plastic. They were red and about the size of a galleon, on it was written two words. *Civilian Cleared*. He handed them to Remus. "Attach these to your robes. In light of recent events it has been deemed by the Ministry of Magic that all visitors to Diagon Alley must be identified as having passed through a security checkpoint, such as this one. Please know that these badges are to be returned before leaving and that they must be worn at all times whilst visiting the Alley. Failure to do so may result in prosecution, as you will be classified as dangerous by the Aurors inside if no security clearance badge is identified on your person. The Ministry of Magic hopes you have a happy day shopping, and bids you come again."

Harry shook his head. It was obvious that the man had had that little speech memorized, he sounded just like an automation. "Thank you," said Lupin, passing a badge to Harry and then pinning his own on. Harry did the same.

They began to walk towards the gate but the second Auror, the one who hadn't said anything stepped forward, effectively blocking their way. "Excuse me, Mr. Potter," he said nervously, his voice had a slight

tremble

to

it.

"Yes?" said Harry, who noticed that Remus had his hand in his pocket, and was eyeing the Auror suspiciously.

"Well... I -er- I... just wanted to say good luck and all. You know, because of what it said in the *Prophet*...."

Harry blinked in surprise, but then nodded. "Thank you," he said, offering his hand to the man. The shook hands and then separated; Remus was still casting suspicious glances around the place. "Thank you," Harry said again and followed Remus over to the iron gate, which opened automatically as he approached.

"The whole Division is behind you, Mr. Potter," the man called from behind him. "If there's anything you ever need. Minister Weasley has made it clear we are to aid you in anyway that we can."

"Yes, thank you," Harry called a third time, finally stepping through the gate and on to the familiar street of Diagon Alley, making sure his badge was firmly attached and visible on his robes.

Well as he and Remus walked, the alley still looked the same. The same sights, sounds, and smells, that made Diagon Alley what it was, were still there. But Harry could sense the change, even if it wasn't there for his other senses. It was in the atmosphere of the place, the tension in the air. The look that many gave him and Lupin as they passed by. The people in the alley were scared; they cast worried glances from one person to the next, fearing attack. Also Harry noticed that there was really no one under his age on the street, parents hadn't brought their younger children.

That was just the feeling he got from the place, to look around you wouldn't know anything was different. But war had changed this place, Voldemort had changed this place. Stationed at the doorway of every other shop were Aurors, clearly identified by their shining white robes, complete with Ministry crest, and the wand they held in their hands. Harry counted at least twenty on this part of the street alone. He and Lupin entered the square amidst a crowd of other shoppers, which was another thing, people were travelling in groups. Harry's gaze was drawn

across the square to the memorial shining brightly in the sun against the wall. He could see the long list of names from where he stood and he saw Lupin shake his head slightly. Harry recalled standing there with Rafe when the street had been nearly deserted.

The continued walking through and passed the square, onto the white shining building of Gringotts. The bank towered up imposingly against the rest of the street, but it was also the brightest place. Harry looked down the intersection to Knockturn alley on his left and walked swiftly passed it, coming in time with Lupin to the steps of the bank. Together the two of them walked up the steps and through the burnished bronze front doors of the building. Harry nodded to the goblin, in his scarlet and gold uniform, as they entered and the small goblin nodded back.

Through the front door, he and Lupin came to the next doors. A pair of silver ones engraved with the rhyme Harry had seen many times before:

*Enter stranger, but take heed
Of what awaits the sin of greed
For those who take, but do not earn,
Must pay most dearly in their turn.
So if you seek beneath our floors
A treasure that was never yours,
Thief, you have been warned, beware
Of finding more than treasure there.*

As they approached, two more goblin guards pushed the doors open and Harry and Lupin passed into the main hall. The large chamber stretched across the way and the long counter was filled with hundreds of goblins, all busy working, counting and weighing coins, writing in ledgers, and examining precious stones. The hall was full of people going about their daily business, and Harry saw with a frown that there were no Aurors on guard in here.

Harry followed Lupin over to a goblin at the counter who was sitting on his large stool, weighing some coins and placing them in a bag. "Good day," said the goblin, looking up from his work. "How can I help you?"

"Mr. Lupin and Mr. Potter to see Mr. Gort," whispered Remus, not wanting Harry's name known in the bank.

"I see," said the goblin, looking Harry up and down. "Do you have any identification?"

Remus blinked. *No* Harry thought. *It was odd that things like that weren't carried in the wizarding world...?*

"We received a letter," continued Remus, not missing a beat while pulling out said letter from his robes pocket and handing it to the goblin. "Required to come see Mr. Gort about Sirius Black's will...."

Harry had never seen any man look or sound as sad as Remus did right then. His eyes became unfocused at the mention of Sirius and a bitter pain surfed across them, casting his face into shadow. It made him look older than he already did. Harry fully appreciated at that moment how the loss of Sirius had affected him, and how being here today made it true, made it final. He felt an enormous amount of pity for Remus right now, but he knew that Lupin wouldn't like that, so he didn't say anything.

"Ah yes, very well," agreed the goblin. He then proceeded to tap three times on a small spherical globe sitting on his desk. The globe glowed blue for a moment and then the goblin tapped it a final time. "Mr. Gort will be here shortly," he said and then returned to his coins after handing Remus his letter back.

Harry and Remus didn't have to wait long. After about three minutes a short, finely dressed goblin came walking through the crowds of people, a slighter shorter goblin trailing behind him. "Mr. Gort," said Lupin, moving forward and kneeling slightly to shake the hand of the goblin.

"Good day, Gentlemen," he said with a nod to Harry. "If you please, we'll discuss this in my office."

Harry and Lupin followed the small goblins back through the crowd of people, dodging them one way or another. He saw several people look at him and recognition dawn on their faces, but thankfully he got away before anyone could say anything. They followed Gorbag Gort over to one of the many side doors that connected to the main hall they were in now. Through this door they were led to another long chamber, this one was dark and was lit by only a few torches on the wall. It was a long narrow corridor with a velvet carpet and strong oak doors with plaques

nailed to them. Soon they came to one labelled *Gorbag Gort, Head Goblin*.

The small goblin, which was the assistant to Mr. Gort, pushed open the door and the three of them entered. Inside there was light streaming in through a window which overlooked Diagon Alley. Harry briefly saw the shoppers and Aurors. There was a desk in the centre of the room with two chairs in front of it. The walls were lined with odd books and loose pieces of parchment, which rightfully gave the room a messy look. Harry sat down in the offered chair next to Lupin.

"Right, Gentlemen," began Gort, seated on a heightened chair. "Thank you for coming in today, and I apologise for the lack of notice the letter offered."

"It's okay," whispered Lupin, while Harry just nodded.

Mr. Gort nodded and proceeded. "Straight to business then," the goblin gave a smile that could have rivalled Voldemort's for evil and pulled out a piece of parchment from a pile on his desk and began to read. "Division of assets and funds of the late Mr. Sirius Black, meeting commenced at five past twelve on the afternoon of Sunday the 5th 1997."

As he spoke, the smaller goblin that had been silent so far began writing furiously on a long roll of parchment, obviously documenting the meeting. Mr. Gort continued. "All present are Gorbag Gort, Head Goblin Gringotts Wizarding Bank. Fliktrask Sant, Personal Assistant to Mr. Gort. Remus John Lupin, beneficiary number one, and Harry James Potter, beneficiary number two."

Harry and Lupin remained silent as a moment was given while Gort searched the piles of parchment on his desk for something. He soon found it and produced quite a thick folder from the mess. "Here we go..." mumbled Gorbag, opening the folder and passing Harry and Lupin each a single letter. Harry looked down to his and realised with a start that his name was written on the front in Sirius' untidy scrawl. *This was a letter from Sirius....* It was quite thick as well. Harry looked over to Remus and saw pure emotion running across the man's face.

"Shall I begin the reading?" asked Mr. Gort.

Remus was silent and staring with wide eyes at the letter in his hand, so Harry answered. "Please," he said hoarsely, his voice catching in his throat.

Mr. Gort straightened the small glasses on his nose and began reading. "Dispersion of Assets and Funds belonging to the late Mr. Sirius Black, as requested by him to be divided after the first of January 1997 is as follows." He stopped reading there and placed the parchment on the desk. Mr. Gort then ran his finger down the length of it and whispered a word that they didn't catch. The next moment a voice echoed around the room. It was a voice that Harry had longed to hear, but knew he never would again in this world. It was Sirius.

"I hereby divide the entire Black family portfolio between the two beneficiaries, Harry James Potter and Remus John Lupin. To my good friend, Moony, I leave 12 Grimmauld Place and all possessions therein. The Black Family Estate in Cardiff and all possessions therein. I leave the Hippogriff Buckbeak, take care of that animal Moony, it took good care of me. 10,000 shares in Bertie Botts Every Flavour Bean worth at the current market value ten galleons a piece. I don't know why but my father loved those beans? 10,000 shares in Nimbus worth at the current market value fifteen galleons a piece. And finally, as the last Black upon this earth and sole owner of the family's vault, I leave you twenty five per cent of the funds in the Black Family Vault, which is roughly seven million galleons. I bet that nearly gave you a heart attack, didn't it, Moony?"

Remus' eyes grew even wider as he processed what he had just heard from the will. "Sirius...." he whispered. "I...." Remus faltered and Harry put a hand on his shoulder. The parchment was speaking again.

"To my godson, Harry. I leave several Black family properties around the world. Including the Black Family estate in France, the Black family estate in Australia, the Black Family estate in North America, the Black Family estate in Germany, and all the possessions therein. Some of the things in those houses could be pretty nasty, Harry, be careful if you ever use them. 10,000 shares in Bertie Botts Every Flavour Bean worth at the current market value ten galleons a piece. He *really* loved those beans! 10,000 shares in Nimbus worth at the current market value fifteen

galleons a piece. And finally, as your godfather and all around nice guy, I leave you the remaining seventy five percent of the Black Family vault, Number 711, which is roughly twenty one million galleons. Have a good life, Harry. As your guardian I'm ordering you to spend that money quickly and on junk that you don't need. I'm sorry I won't be there to see you grow up, but have some fun as you do."

Harry was speechless as the voice died down. He had tears in his eyes, as did Remus. They both couldn't believe it; Sirius had left them so much. Harry had had no idea that Sirius had been so wealthy. Though, Harry thought, he'd rather have Sirius back over all the galleons in the world. Remus felt the same. "Is everything in order, Gentlemen?" asked Mr. Gort.

"I believe so," whispered Harry, clutching his letter close to himself as Gort searched through the file for something else. After a moment he removed two black folders and handed each Harry and Remus one.

"Share and property portfolio's, Gentlemen," he said. "Land and house deeds, shares in certain companies. It's all in there."

"Thank you," said Remus hoarsely, wiping at his eyes.

"The galleons were transferred from Mr. Black's vault over the past five days, as the sum was in the region of thirty million this took a while and caused the delay. Gringotts would like to apologise for this inconvenience." Harry and Remus nodded, each of them looking down at their unopened letter. "The money transfer was complete as of seven o'clock yesterday evening. Mr. Lupin the sum of eight million galleons, two hundred and thirty four thousands sickles, and three thousand knuts, has been successfully transferred into your vault." Remus nodded numbly. Gortbag turned to Harry. "Mr. Potter the sum of twenty four million galleons, nine hundred and two thousand sickles, and nine thousand knuts, has been successfully transferred to your vault as well. Congratulations, Gentlemen. You're are both now very wealthy."

Harry turned to look at Remus. He was shaking his head and seemed to be laughing slightly. "Oh... Sirius," he said. "Thank you, Padfoot."

"Did you know his family was that rich?" Harry asked Remus.

Remus sighed and dabbed at his eyes with a pocket handkerchief. "I knew they were rich, but this...."

"The Black Family Vault had accumulated an enormous amount of interest over the past fifteen years," said Gorbag. "Owing to Mr. Black's incarceration and the subsequent death of all his family members, the money fell into disuse, and the interest accumulated. Now, if you two would please sign here, and here, and here, we can conclude our business."

The man offered Remus a quill which he took and signed his name with. "Thank you," he said again quietly under his breath. Harry took the quill next and he too signed it.

"Well, Gentlemen. Thank you both very much for coming down. I'm sorry to say that I have other business to attend to now, but Fliktrask will show you out," he nodded to the assistant goblin standing by the door in his scarlet and gold uniform.

"Thank you, Mr. Gort," said both Remus and Harry, standing to shake the small goblin's hand, both in a little bit of a daze.

Harry and Remus followed the assistant goblin back through the corridor and out into the main hall of the bank. Harry was lost deep in his thoughts as they walked, thinking more about the letter now in his pocket, than about the millions of galleons he'd just inherited. *This was just like Sirius* he thought with a smile. *God I wonder what he wrote in that letter?*

Harry and Remus fell on to a bench against the side wall opposite the counter and regarded each other silently for a moment. "Are you okay?" asked Remus, his eyes searching Harry's for any sign about how he was feeling.

"I certainly didn't expect this when I woke up this morning," he said with a small smile. "It's just like him tough, isn't it?"

"What? To have millions of galleons he never mentions and then to prepare a will giving it all to me and you in case he died? Yeah, that's just like old Padfoot, God bless him." Remus smiled sadly, and again wiped away a tear.

"Always liked his jokes," whispered Harry. "Never one to disappoint...." Harry briefly realised that he and Remus had never talked like this. They'd needed too, desperately needed too... but with everything being how it was, they hadn't had chance. So it happened now, as the crowds of Gringotts customers passed them by, he and Remus remembered Sirius.

Remus truly smiled now. "No... never one to disappoint. I remember this one time at the Halloween feast in fifth year he charmed all the plates in the hall," Remus was laughing now, and fighting to finish his sentence. "Charmed all the plates in the hall, except his and James', to eat anything that was placed on them...." Harry smiled and Remus continued to laugh. "Every plate and I mean every plate. Dumbledore's and all the professors as well. Even mine... at exactly eight thirty each plate sprouted teeth and began to eat itself."

Harry began to laugh as he pictured this. "I bet it was chaos...."

Remus wiped away a tear of mirth from his eyes. "Oh yes... Dumbledore set it right with a wave of his wand, though, and McGonagall immediately identified the culprit."

"How?"

Remus was laughing again and it was a long moment before Harry could get an answer. "At the last minute Sirius had this bright idea, and charmed his own plate to do the same, so the only plate in the hall not affected was James'. Of course your father didn't know about this and by the time the plates went off it was too late." Harry laughed even harder now and felt the tears of laughter in his own eyes. Remus continued. "And if that wasn't enough Sirius drew in the air with his wand, in big bold blue neon letters, above James' head that said: *Potter did it!*. There was also an arrow pointing to him..."

Harry laughed again. "What did McGonagall do?"

Remus smiled with the memory. "Well... James pleaded not guilty of course, but Sirius had done too good of a job placing the blame. A month's worth of detentions with the caretaker."

Harry laughed again. It felt good to laugh, not just to grieve. "And what did my dad do?"

"Oh James swore vengeance?" smiled Lupin. "And he got it, viciously...." Harry waited for Remus to continue. "Your dad waited a whole four months before taking his revenge. He waited one night until Sirius was asleep, then placed all these Muggle dolls and soft toys in his bed with him, took a picture of it, made about a thousand copies, and taped them to every single seat in the Great Hall." Harry burst out laughing, holding his sides. Remus was laughing too. "It took him all night to do it and about a hundred rolls of tape. Next morning everybody went down to breakfast to see Sirius cuddling up to a soft toy."

Harry shook his head with laughter. "What did Sirius do?"

Remus sighed, holding the letter tightly in his hand. "Swore vengeance, and the cycle continued. McGonagall was at her wit's end by the end of the year. And Sirius never saw the end of those photo's for the rest of his days at Hogwarts." Remus voice seemed to die away at the end as he fell into his memories. "God things have changed in the past twenty years...."

"And now they're both gone," whispered Harry, saying what they were both thinking. He was also holding his letter in his hand, fearing to open it. "Both died trying to protect me...."

Lupin turned to look at him. "Don't blame yourself, Harry," he said calmly, sadly, placing a hand on Harry's shoulder. "James chose to fight Voldemort. He died honourably. And Sirius... Sirius loved you as if you were his own son, he couldn't not come to help you back in June. Nothing, and I mean nothing, could have stopped him from coming to the Department of Mysteries that day. Whether that was a good or a bad choice it doesn't matter now, he made it and we should respect him for it."

"I do," said Harry, who again had tears in his eyes. It had been a very emotional day. "Did he? Did he know of the prophecy, Remus?"

Lupin's grip on Harry's arm tightened considerably, and his whole body became tense. "I don't think he did. I didn't until a week ago when

Dumbledore told us all. James and Lily knew of course, they tried to hide you from it...."

"Didn't work," Harry said pragmatically, truthfully.

Remus didn't have anything to say to that. "Listen, Harry. I'll be there to help you every step of the way. You don't have to face this alone; I owe it to James and Sirius, the best friends anyone could ever ask for, to stick by you more than ever now. This *prophecy*, Harry. It doesn't have to rule your life. You can make your own choices, no one should ask anymore beyond that."

"It's my job, Remus. My job to end it. I can't walk away from that...."

"I don't expect you too, Harry. You're too much like your father to back down from a challenge. All I'm saying is don't carry it all, share the burden. I'm here if you need me...." Remus' eyes brimmed with tears as he said this, and the force of his words really touched Harry. "I'm not really the best father figure, Harry, but I'll try my best to help."

I'm not alone he thought. *Mum, Dad, Sirius... wherever you are... I'll be all right.* "I think we should get going now," whispered Harry, again wiping away the tears and looking around the busy bank. It was still there, everything was still moving, still changing.

"I really miss him," said Harry two minutes later, as he and Lupin walked back up towards the Leaky cauldron.

"Me too, Harry," agreed Lupin. "Me too...."

They returned their badges at the security desk and walked quietly back into the Leaky Cauldron. It had just gone one thirty, and the pub wasn't quite as empty as it was two hours ago. He and Remus dodged and weaved through the crowds, trying to get to the fireplace. Eventually they managed it after pushing passed three men with extraordinarily long beards that reached the floor.

Harry took a pinch first, while Lupin looked anxiously around at the growing crowd. Harry knew he was fearing attack, so he was quick. "Headmaster's Office, Hogwarts," he said, dropping the powder and letting the green flames engulf him. It took a few moments, but

eventually he stumbled into Dumbledore's office, clutching the folder of shares in his hand with the letter as he did.

"Welcome back," smiled Dumbledore, standing from behind his desk. "I trust everything went well?"

"As well as to be expected," said Harry, once again dusting away the soot. "Considering Remus and I just became multi-millionaires."

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows and Harry saw the amusement in his eyes. It was then that Remus came spinning into the room, he landed without much fuss. "Welcome back, Remus," Dumbledore said, walking out from behind his desk and into the shadow of the window. "Harry tells me you had quite a surprise when you reached the bank."

"Indeed," nodded Remus. "Sirius always did like surprises...."

As Dumbledore and Remus talked Harry looked down nervously to the letter in his hands. It was from Sirius, obviously written should he die... which he had. Harry, at the same time, wanted so much to read it but was also terrified of the idea. His mind was a conflict of emotions, but it all came back to one thought. *If I read it, I might be able to find closure? But what if I don't like what it says...? How will I know if I don't open it?*

"I have to sort a few things out," Remus was saying when Harry jumped out of his thoughts. He noticed with a start that Remus was looking at him. "This is goodbye again, Harry," he said sadly. "Hopefully it won't be for too long. I'm sure I'll see you around Easter."

"Yes, thank you, Remus. I'm glad we finally talked about... everything," laughed Harry nervously, and Remus smiled knowingly.

"It was long coming," he nodded, walking over to the fireplace and once again taking a pinch of floo powder. "Goodbye, Albus, Harry. Take care," he ended finally, desperately, a pleading look in his eyes as they connected with Harry's. And in a rush of green flames, he was gone.

"Is something troubling you, Harry?" asked Dumbledore, returning to his seat as Remus left.

Harry remained standing, clutching his documents in his hands,

especially the sealed envelope. "It's a letter from Sirius," he mumbled, looking into Dumbledore's eyes. "Written for me should he die...."

"Ah," nodded Dumbledore. "Well I can't tell you what you should do there, Harry. Just know that the choice is yours. I, personally, would open it. You see there are many possibilities as to what that letter may bring. I think one of them may be acceptance over guilt. Sirius would have known what he was doing."

Harry nodded. "I will open it," he said strongly. "It just scares me to do so...."

"As it should," began Dumbledore. "These things in life are not meant to be easy, why would anyone bother if they were? I believe you won't find blame or guilt within that envelope, Harry. Only love...."

Harry didn't say anything for a moment, but his hand shook slightly as he held the envelope. "Thank you, Professor. I think I'll go have a think about this," he said with a sniff, holding back the tears that had appeared so frequently that afternoon.

"You do that, Harry," Dumbledore agreed warmly, sympathy in his voice. "But please know that your friends and I will be there if you need help."

Harry nodded his silent thanks. He really wasn't alone in this. People he cared about did so in turn for him. He had a family of friends should he need them soon, and it was most likely that he would.

So Harry found himself, fifteen minutes later, sitting on his bed in the dorm, the curtains drawn, staring hard at the creamy white envelope in his hands. *Harry James Potter* it said on the front, in a messy black ink. The common room had been deserted on his way through, so thankfully he had time in which to do this.

Harry didn't actually know how much time had passed as he sat with the envelope in his hand working up the courage to read its content's. After what seemed like hours of deliberation, he slipped his finger across the break, and tore the envelope open. "Okay.... Sirius," he said aloud to himself. "Let's see what you've got to say...."

Chapter 20 - The Beginning of Our Story

When you have to kill a man, it costs
nothing to be polite

--Winston Churchill

Dear Harry,

I guess if you're reading this I'm dead. Went out in some brave act of heroism saving many lives and taking many Death Eater's with me... well either that or Buckbeak finally had enough and crushed me. Those are the only two alternatives I see, so I hope it was the former. I've left everything to you and Moony... have a good life, Harry. You more than anyone deserves it.

As I write this the date is April 30th 1996. I'm sorry I won't be there to see you grow up, not that you had far to go when I last saw you. You're the bravest, strongest person I've had the pleasure to know, Harry. You're so much like your father at times it's impossible to see a difference between you two. I've tried my best to take James' place as the father figure in your life, but at times it seemed that you were the one guiding me. Its because of you I escaped that godforsaken island; it's because of you I had the strength to carry on. Thank you, Harry.

If you're blaming yourself for my death in any way, don't. I probably did something incredibly stupid like popping off down to the Auror division to greet some old friends. Wherever I am, know that I don't blame you, and no one else, especially you, should either. Also know that wherever I am James will probably be there as well, knocking the stuffing out of me for leaving you on your own.

Make sure you continue to live, Harry, now I'm gone. I know it's hard, I know you haven't had the easiest of lives. After James and Lily were gone I completely lost it, and ended up in Azkaban for twelve damn years. I know that death hurts, but don't dwell on me for too long. I

wouldn't want you to waste away what precious childhood you have left grieving for an old Marauder like me.

I know you probably feel like the world is a cruel place to live in right now. What with everything it has thrown at you... but there is some good in it, you know that, that's why you've fought since that bitter Halloween night. You have two of the greatest friends a person could ask for, I did once before choice set in and killed us all, don't lose them, don't push them away. Open up a bit, you've got emotional walls built up around yourself higher than Azkaban's, there are people out there who are more than willing to help you. Don't shy away from that. I know that my death has probably hurt you, I know because I would feel the same way if I had lost you. If I died protecting you, Harry, then I fully believe that my life was not wasted. You were all that existed for me the past fifteen years, you made the Hell that was Azkaban a Hell worth living.

Some people in this world are going to expect too much from you in the near future, Harry. Know this now that you make your own choices in life, don't let others decide your path for you. I'm talking about the people that at the same time hide you from the truth, tell you nothing, and then expect you to do the unimaginable for them. If you're wondering what the hell I'm talking about, then put this letter down right now and go and see Dumbledore. Ask him about the prophecy. If you don't know, go now, stop reading....

Yes, Harry. I knew of the prophecy. James told me sixteen years ago the night you were born. You can't begin to understand how devastating it was, that you, a baby, were expected to defeat him. It seemed impossible! He was the strongest Dark lord ever, and you were still in nappies. By now you're probably wondering why I didn't tell you sooner. I held Dumbledore in too high of a regard not to respect his wishes. He told me you weren't ready to know; at the time I believed he was right, you were too young. My opinion on that matter soon changed of course. All of this year I've wanted to tell you, since you saw him resurrected. It seemed only fair, but again Dumbledore intervened.

Don't blame the old man, Harry, I don't. He has dealt with more than anyone could ever know. His choices in life have never been easy, rather like yours. If he wanted to keep your childhood peaceful for a little

while longer who was I to stop him? It seemed like the right idea at the time... now I see we were just delaying the inevitable. I want you to know, Harry, that no matter what anyone says you don't have to live up to this prophecy. Nothing controls your life, your fate is what you make it, this war shouldn't be your problem.

Though knowing you you've already begun to fight, fighting a war that shouldn't have to be fought. It's just who you are, you are your father's son, and like him never one to back down from a challenge, however immense it may be. You've chosen to fight, no matter what I write I know it in my heart that you will fight. You're one of the few good men in this world Harry, that care more about others than they do themselves. There are so few of you that the world may seem a greedy, unforgiving place to live. Don't let this world break you! You have proven time and time again that despite the odds you can pull through, to carry on living, to carry on protecting those you care about. You are who you choose to be, and right now I couldn't be more proud for what you have chosen. Through it all, through the years of misery in the Muggle world, and the trials faced while at Hogwart's you still managed to turn out all right without anyone to guide you. I know I have no need to worry that you will continue to shine without me. You have your whole life ahead of you, and wonderful people, wonderful friends to spend it with. Find happiness, find love. True love is what your parents had, find it yourself and treasure it beyond all else.

These may seem just like empty words now, Harry, what with the enormity of your task still lying ahead of you, but one day... I know you're strong enough to overcome his evil, to finally claim a life you have been denied. Sadly, though, I'm no longer there to help you along the way, not that you ever needed me.

As I've said above, Harry, the world can be a very unforgiving place, but it can also be a very beautiful place. Find what's good in your life and hold on to it, fight for it with every ounce of your being. This is the last advice I give you as your guardian, as your godfather, and as someone who loves you dearly. God speed, Harry and good luck with whatever you do in life, I know without a shadow of a doubt that you will succeed.

From this Life to the next,

Sirius Black

Harry held the letter loosely in his shaking hands. The curtains around his bed shielded him from the world at the moment, but he knew the instant they were opened it would come bursting in like the morning rays of sunlight over the distant mountains. He had read and re-read the letter at least half a dozen times and each time he had felt a plethora of emotions. Emotions ranging from fear, to anger, to love, to acceptance, to grief, to loss, to resentment, but always in the end coming back to closure.

That's what he'd hoped he would get from this letter, and he had found it. *Closure!* From a death that shouldn't have been. That had torn him away from the very foundations his life was built on, made him question his own need or want for life. Even though he was long dead, Sirius himself had helped guide him to overcome his death.

"Thank you, Sirius," Harry whispered, letting fall a silent tear onto the parchment. "Oh god, thank you!" It was a relief, such a relief. All the grief and guilt seemed to fall away with Sirius' words, to be replaced by the love his godfather had had for him. It was a truly happy feeling, not a dark one. There was nothing to worry about anymore, Sirius believed in him. It didn't matter that he knew the prophecy, he had his reasons for keeping it hidden, and Harry respected that.

With a deep breath, Harry carefully folded the letter and returned it to its envelope. A small smile spread across his face as he held the envelope tightly in his hands. He had accepted it, accepted his death. Sirius was truly gone... dead, but however much that that may hurt, it was okay. Harry had accepted it. But what did that leave him with?

Harry felt a deep beating in his chest, it was his heart. He had been left with love for his godfather. *Find what's good in your life and hold on to it, fight for it with every ounce of your being.* Sirius' last advice, what he wished for Harry to do, to be! *Well* thought Harry, drying his eyes. *What's good in my life...?* His thoughts instantly fell on his friends, and the rest of the Weasley family, and this castle and the innocent students it held, or would hold tomorrow. Sirius's letter had hardened his will, his resolve to fight, to destroy the evil that was quickly getting its cold grasp over their

world. It didn't belong here, and now Harry realised, beyond anything that he had ever known, he had the determination to destroy it... once and for all.

There was a low grumbling in Harry's stomach and he put his hand across it. *God I'm hungry* he thought. His last meal had been breakfast, which was... Harry looked at his watch... *nine hours ago!* With a start Harry jumped up and out of the bed, casting aside the curtains. He hadn't realised he'd been sitting there for so long. *Four hours* he thought, *it took me four hours to read that letter... and to accept it.* Harry would have laughed if his stomach hadn't emitted another low growl.

Slipping his trainers back on, he walked to the base of his bed and flipped open the lid of his trunk. His eyes instantly fell on Ethan's dagger, reflecting the light of a torch on the wall. Harry placed his letter on top of it, silently reminding himself to get a sheath for it the next time he was in Hogsmeade or Diagon Alley.

Harry felt a bit stifled in his robes so he pulled them over his head and took them off, leaving him in his jeans and shirt, much more comfortable. Before heading downstairs, he walked over to the bathroom and splashed water on his face, to wash away the weariness he now felt. It had been a long day, and his bruises from training with Dermas were aching, so the water felt like a new awakening. As he looked into the mirror, Harry absently ran a finger down his scar, it tingled slightly at his touch and Harry could feel the magic there, it practically radiated from it. He sighed and turned away.

With a slight spring in his step Harry walked down the stairs, anxious to get to dinner in the Great Hall. He came to the bottom of the stairs and caught a hint of movement out of the corner of his eye, coming from the base of the stairs to the girls' dormitories. Harry turned and stared into the surprised face of Ginny Weasley.

"Harry?" she said, stopping in surprise when she saw him. "I didn't know you were here?"

Harry smiled, and he subconsciously twirled the ring from Ginny around on the tip of his finger, she noticed this and smiled as well. "I've been up in the dorm all afternoon," he said. "Sorting out a few things...."

"Is everything okay, Harry?" she asked as the two of them began to walk out of the common room, passed the empty chairs and blazing fireplace.

Harry truly thought about this question before answering. His automatic response would have been 'yes', but Sirius's letter had thrown a few things into perspective. So when Harry answered, he answered honestly. "You know what, Gin. I think everything will be...."

He and Ginny walked down through the long halls of Hogwarts together, both heading to the Great hall. Ginny told him that Hermione and Ron had gone down ten minutes ago; she had stayed a bit longer to change clothes. Apparently they had spent the day down at Hagrid's. He and Ginny entered the Hall the same moment as Professor McGonagall, who gave them a rare, warm smile before entering. "Potter, may I have a word with you please?" she asked, glancing at Ginny. "Alone...."

Ginny looked between Harry and McGonagall for a moment before nodding, and turning away, heading over to the partially full circular table in the centre of the Hall. "What is it, Professor?" asked Harry from the door, he was just inside the Hall.

Professor McGonagall smiled again, and this time Harry saw a profound respect in her eyes. "I have found you a griffin, Harry," she said.

Harry frowned for a moment before it all became clear. *Of course* he thought. *I'd completely forgotten... animagus training.* "Great," replied Harry, smiling and truly meaning it. "Where is it?"

"It'll be here within the week. Express delivery from the Sierra Nevada mountain range in the United States. I've been told it is quite a lively specimen."

Harry and McGonagall began to walk over to the table; Harry gave his friends a small wave. "So how long do you think it is going to take now?" he asked. "You know, until I can transform."

McGonagall frowned with thought. "I expect two months, maybe less. You never cease to amaze us, Harry. I trust you'll manage it."

They had reached the table now so all talk stopped; his animagus training was a secret to all. *I'll have to practice all those other things I*

learnt he thought, taking a seat next to Hermione, in between her and Ginny. *And I have to prepare for all the other training I'll be doing from tomorrow onwards, and I have to prepare the DA. I've got a lot to do....*

"So how was our day?" asked Harry happily, thinking of Sirius's letter. It had helped him so much.

Hermione looked nervous, and to her left Harry saw that Ron did as well. "Are you okay?" she asked, her eyes piercing into his, trying to detect a hint of his emotions.

"I'm a lot better than I've been for awhile," he said happily, truthfully. Hermione saw the truth in his words. "A lot better, so is Remus. We had a talk, finally."

Hermione smiled and Ron did as well. "Everything at the bank went all right then?" asked Ron, holding Hermione's hand.

Harry looked across the table at Mr. and Mrs. Granger, who had just sat down. They smiled knowingly at their daughter and Ron. Harry turned back to Ron, and his question. "I'd say it went all right," nodded Harry, grabbing a goblet full of pumpkin juice and taking a heavy drink. His throat felt dry. "Sirius..." Harry smiled, shaking his head, and biting into his steak.

"TWENTY FOUR MILLION GALLEONS! BLOODY HELL," shouted Ron, half an hour later as the four of them sat around the common room fire, opening Harry's mail.

Harry laughed at Ron, Hermione, and Ginny, all their mouths hanging open, like those clowns at the carnival that moved back and forth. They were the only ones in the common room, for today anyway, tomorrow the castle would be full of students again, and, remembered Harry, his unique training would officially begin.

"I never knew Sirius was so rich," commented Ginny, frowning at the letter she had just opened. "This isn't a nice one," she whispered, crunching it up and throwing it into the fire.

Harry smiled at her. "He wasn't for a time. The money sat in Gringotts for almost two decades untouched. As his family had died and he was sent to Azkaban, interest accumulated...." Harry mused, smiling at the fan letter he was holding. It was from Angelina Johnson, previous Gryffindor, Chaser on the Quidditch team, and a good friend of Harry's. She supported him to the very end with the prophecy, saying that if he ever needed anything she'd help.

"Well Divination is going to be lonely without you," sulked Ron, also realising that tomorrow the new term started and Harry was gone, to do what he had to do. "Whose death is Trelawney going to predict now?"

"Don't know?" smiled Harry, abandoning the mail and leaning back in his chair, closing his eyes. "Don't care." As Harry began to relax a vicious shot of pain ripped through his scar. It made him sit up with a jerk, and subconsciously raise a hand to his forehead.

"What is it?" asked Hermione quickly, also forgetting the letters she was opening.

"What did you see, Harry?" Ginny asked as well.

Harry frowned and rubbed his scar lightly. "Not sure... I think a Death Eater has just been given the Mark... but I'm not sure, it was very vague...."

Ron seemed to sigh with relief. "Well that's good. Means he's far away if your scar isn't reacting that much..."

Harry thought about this for a moment. "I wouldn't be so sure...." he said slowly. Something told him otherwise, but it was only a nagging suspicion, and those were the ones that Harry had come to trust the most.

"My Lord, preparations for the 21st have begun. All will be ready come the equinox."

"See that it is," hissed an unseen voice in the darkness. All the Death

Eater saw of his Master were two pitiless red eyes, shining in a dark corner where the shadows seemed to be drawn. "You are dismissed."

The Death Eater bowed low to the Dark Lord and quickly exited the room, fear evident in his step to all.

"The Vernal Equinox...." Voldemort whispered to himself. "Our prophecy will be broken, Potter...."

Harry awoke to Monday, the first day of the new term. He glanced at his watch as he sat slowly up in bed. It was 11:30. That surprised him; for months he'd been waking up early, nightmares plaguing his sleep, but now, as he cast his mind back to last night, he couldn't recall a single nightmare. For one night he had been free, and had earned some much needed sleep in the process.

After showering Harry put on a clean pair of clothes and headed down into the common room. It was empty. He didn't know where his friends could have gone, but it was coming up lunch time, they may be in the Great Hall or on their way to it.

So Harry set off down through the castle, as he'd done so many times before. The endless portraits and cold suits of armour reeled past as he came to the moving staircases. After carefully navigating himself down, Harry came to the top of the stairs that overlooked the Entrance Hall.

All was quiet here, and the great doors to the castle were open, swinging loudly on their hinges. A cold breeze blew up from these doors and hit Harry at the top of the stairs. Harry frowned, things were getting unnerving. He found the lack of people in the castle rather strange and worrying. But just at that moment one of the doors on the first floor below him opened, it was the door to Divination class, Firenze's divination class. After a moment the centaur himself walked through and out the doors, his piercing deep blue eyes taking in his surroundings immediately and falling onto Harry just as quick.

"Harry Potter," nodded Firenze, a look of respect in his dazzling eyes.

"Hello, Professor," said Harry, coming down the stairs two at a time. He

walked over to the centaur.

"I have been meaning to speak with you," said Firenze, his hooves clacking on the cold stone as he moved.

Harry frowned. "About?"

Firenze held his gaze for a moment. "Please follow me," the centaur said eventually and then turned and headed back into the room he'd just come out of. Harry followed with the mingled feelings of confusion and anxiety assaulting him. He wanted to find his friends.

Firenze's classroom, made to look like his natural habitat of the forest, was blanketed in darkness. The trees were casting dark shadows with the small star and moonlight that hit them. Harry always found it a strange feeling to go walking from the light of day, and into the night of the classroom. He followed Firenze into the very centre of the forest clearing; at this point the calm centaur gazed up into the star speckled heavens.

"Do you know how imprecise the art of Divination can be, Harry Potter?" asked Firenze after a long moment. "How no Fate is certain?"

Harry didn't answer; he followed the centaur's gaze up into the stars and saw mixed within the white light, the tinge of red on one of the astral bodies. It was the planet Mars.

"You see the ever glowing red of the planet Mars?" asked Firenze. Harry nodded. "It has been growing a deeper shade of crimson ever year, for fifteen years. Do you know what this means?"

"No...." whispered Harry, feeling very small with the massive universe of creation wheeling over his head.

"Mars is the planet of war. Long held sacred by the centaurs, respected. We dare not challenge its power," whispered Firenze, and Harry heard the respect on his voice, which was mingled with fear. "As Mars turns darker so shall Evil." Firenze had turned to look at Harry now; his blue eyes seemed to look into his very soul. Harry felt very self conscious.

"Is that what you wanted to tell me?" asked Harry.

"Not entirely," answered Firenze, stomping his hoof once. "Do you remember what I told you three months ago, Mr. Potter?"

Harry nodded. Firenze had read the heavens, and had predicted some pretty heavy stuff. Some of it had involved the death of someone he loved, and he being the only one strong enough to face the coming evil. He was the last hope... or something like that.

"I stand by what I said," nodded the centaur, and then seemed to regard Harry for a moment, as a crystal blue tear fell from his eyes, reflected magnificently in the star light. "The centaurs," he began slowly, "have been guarding a secret for centuries, almost a millennium in fact. No one but a centaur has ever known it in that time." Harry didn't know what to say, so he frowned with a little understanding. "I am about to tell you that secret, Harry Potter...."

Harry blinked in surprise. "What... why?"

Firenze held his gaze for a moment, and then turned away once more, his eyes searching the cosmos desperately for an answer long sought, but was never there. 'A thousand years ago your ancestor, Godric Gryffindor, destroyed the first incarnation of true Evil. It was then that the Planet of War was slowly tinged red. Do you understand yet?"

"No...." Harry answered again, not understanding.

"During that war countless thousands, maybe even millions lost their lives. And Mars then was only slightly tinged.... for almost one thousand years the light of Mars remained the same, never changing, remaining relatively peaceful. Then fifteen years ago it began to darken. We centaurs at the time could scarcely believe our eyes."

"What does that mean?" asked Harry.

Firenze sighed, something Harry had never known him to do. "If millions died in a war where Mars was ever so slightly tinged. How many do you think would die in a war where the very surface runs crimson red?"

Harry opened his mouth to say something but no words came out. If he understood Firenze correctly... *god save us all*. "Are you saying billions of people are going to die?"

Firenze nodded, but there was doubt in his eyes. "As I said divination is a very imprecise art. Even centaurs have been wrong from time to time."

"But do you believe what you've just told me?" asked Harry, taking a step forward. He had a grudging respect for prophecy, and fortune telling. What with being a key figure in a pretty important one.

There was a long silent moment, at which the end of Firenze slowly nodded. "A great battle is coming, that much is clear. At its peak stand the Dark Lord and yourself. The Planet of War grows ever darker with every passing month, and more and more signs in the heavens begin to show that an end is coming."

"What end?" asked Harry nervously.

"The end to the last Great War between Good and Evil...." said Firenze solemnly. "Where the Fate of all life upon this Earth will be decided by your actions, Harry Potter." The centaur whispered the last part sadly, as if he found it unfair.

Harry opened and closed his mouth a few times, realising what Firenze was trying to say. "Are you saying you've seen an outcome to the war?"

"No... I have seen your death...." Firenze let those words hang in the air for a moment while Harry stared wide eyed at him. "The heavens never lie, Mr. Potter, never. In the next few months you will cease to be a part of this worl-"

"What makes you so sure?" cut in Harry, not wanting to believe the centaur. "Have you actually seen me die?"

The Centaur stomped his hoof again. "No, Harry Potter I have not, but I have seen what may come to pass, should you fail to defeat him... soon."

"And what is that?" asked Harry, a bit annoyed at the constant riddles centaurs seemed to talk in.

"It does not matter," whispered Firenze, shaking his head. "It will happen whether I tell you or not...."

"How can you be so sure?" asked Harry, taking a step forward until he was eye level with Firenze.

Those infinitely clear, sparkling blue eyes that held so much intelligence were bored into by Harry's equally deep emerald green ones. Firenze regarded him for a moment before answering, his question hanging in the air. *How can you be so sure?*

"How could I see the future if it didn't already exist?" answered Firenze, raising his eyebrows in the clear moon light. Harry stepped back slightly.

"...If that's true... then why bother to do anything?" asked Harry.

"Now you're beginning to understand," nodded Firenze. "That question is one that I have asked myself many times... the best I can do is put you on the right path, Harry Potter. It is your place to do the rest."

Harry sighed, not really wanting to believe this. *Who would?* he thought. "And what path would that be...?"

Firenze's gaze became absolutely cold as ice, serious beyond any doubt. "Avoid the circle of light," he whispered, the strongest conviction Harry had ever heard in his voice. "Fate and Destiny seem to have chosen you to fight this war for the good of all, Harry Potter. This circle, which you see in your dreams, will rip the very meaning of your existence from this world. To where it will take you I do not know, maybe into death, as I have seen."

Harry stared silently at the planet of war above him in the heavens, its dark tinge clearly evident. *I control my own life* he thought. *Sirius said it in his letter. No prophecy rules my life; I'm free to choose how I live...* He turned to face Firenze. "Divination is an imprecise art, Professor," he said smoothly, truthfully, and a little bitterly. "And centaurs have been known to be wrong from time to time."

There was a glint of what Harry thought may have been amusement in Firenze's eyes, but the seriousness of his words seemed to belie that. "I wish you good day, Harry Potter," the centaur nodded, no emotion in his voice. "And I strive to believe that the hope this world has in you has not been misplaced...."

Harry nodded to Firenze once, and then turned away, heading back out through the door he'd entered only twenty minutes ago. *God damn it* he thought. *The moment I get some part of my life on track, another part blows itself spectacularly to pieces....* He sighed and tuned towards the Great Hall, hoping his friends were there. *I'll have to think about this later....*

With a heavy sigh and a small shake of his head, Harry set off across the Entrance Hall towards the Great Hall. He didn't get halfway across before the sounds and shouts of a lot of people reached his ears. He turned to the open doors of the castle and saw beyond them that the carriages, carrying students from Hogsmeade, had begun to arrive. The first few carriages were depositing their students now, and a great line wheeled right down the path and onto the Hogsmeade road.

It had been just over two weeks since the Christmas break had begun. Harry felt as if he had lived years in those two weeks. He could remember waving to Dumbledore on the Hogwarts Express as he left on the 23rd of December. Four days later he had had his face torn to shreds by shrapnel, the bone in his left arm snapped through his flesh, his nose crushed, and a very sore scar ripping his forehead open. That was followed by days of recovery, a few days of relaxation, then Trask's arrival and with that came the bruises, and finally Sirius' will reading yesterday afternoon. It had been a long, eventful, painful, emotional holiday. *Not really a holiday at all* he thought.

The first students up the castle steps were a group of Gryffindor first years. Harry couldn't place their names, but he had seen them many times around the castle. "Welcome back, lads," he said as they drew near him.

Their first reaction was to gape at Harry, not quite believing that he was talking to them. They had all seen the Prophet article. Eventually one of them spoke. "Hi..." he said a bit shakily.

"You have a good break?" asked Harry, noticing how nervous he was making them.

One of them opened their mouths to say something, but they were cut off as another, unwanted voice rang across the hall. "Potter," spat Malfoy,

entering the castle flanked by his two goons, Crabbe and Goyle.

"Go away, Malfoy," said Harry dangerously, as the three Slytherins pushed the first year Gryffindor's out of the way. "I really don't want to hear what you've got to say."

Malfoy ignored what he said. "Think you stand a chance against the Dark Lord?" he whispered under his breath, as Crabbe and Goyle smiled stupidly.

"Yes," answered Harry unexpectedly, surprising even himself.

Malfoy blinked, not expecting a straightforward answer like that. "Then you're more of a fool than I already thought," he spat, pure hatred etched into his features.

Harry didn't say anything; he just turned and began walking away. It took him his all to do that, when what he really wanted to do was wipe the smirk of the git's face. For his own part Malfoy cursed Harry under his breath, and began to walk towards the dungeons.

Harry entered the Great Hall a little more annoyed with today than he'd planned to be. What with Malfoy's insults and Firenze's predictions of death and doom, the day had definitely taken a turn for the worse. Harry instantly saw his friends eating at the now elongated house tables, which had been returned for the new term.

"Hello," he said, sitting down and picking up an apple. "Hows things?"

Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and Mr. and Mrs. Granger all said hello in return and asked him where he had been. "Slept in," he said truthfully. It wasn't a lie, it just wasn't the whole truth. He didn't want to worry them any more than he already did.

"Everyone's started to arrive back now," Harry told them, taking a bite of his apple.

"There not the only people to arrive," said Ginny, nodding up to the High table.

Harry followed her gaze and saw that the High table had been extended, extended to seat another six people. He saw the six of them seated there now, next to Dumbledore, McGonagall, Flitwick, Snape, and Hagrid. He instantly knew who they were, his new teachers. The people who had agreed to come and help train him. There were three men and three women, of which Harry only recognised one, Dermas Trask. Trask caught his gaze and gave him a friendly wave, Harry returned it.

"Well it's going to be an interesting term," stated Harry.

"I hope it's nothing like the last one," whispered Ron moodily. "Too much happened last term."

Harry nodded his agreement, but what did Ron expect... they were at war. A war that was just beginning to get a grasp on this world, which may claim a lot of lives if Firenze was to be believed. The house tables slowly filled up around them as more and more people continued to arrive. Harry greeted all his friends from each house as they passed him, and promised the DA members that there would be a meeting soon. *An important meeting...* thought Harry, shaking Seamus' hand and accepting his thanks about the prophecy.

After about half an hour the tables were full of people and the regular hustle and bustle of Hogwarts life was back in full swing. Harry listened to all the stories being told around him about what people had gotten up to over the Christmas break. He also heard the whispers of people who were talking about him.

"Yes, it said he would defeat You-Know-Who!"

"There's always something going on with him, never gets a break."

"In the *Prophet*. You didn't read it?"

"I hope he wins, my mum told me all about the first war. God I hope he wins."

"Do you really think he'll do it? Face You-Know-Who."

Harry sighed and smiled slightly at all the conversations flying around the Hall. He had long since grown use to the whispers about him, but it

was nice to hear that some people had faith in him.

"Trying to get a handle on it all?" asked a friendly voice from across the table.

Harry looked up and into the eyes of this person. "Yeah...." he sighed. "I just hope I don't let them down, Ginny."

Ginny smiled brilliantly at him. A smile filled with trust, hope, belief, and something else Harry couldn't place that spread to her eyes. "You won't," she said simply, without a waver of doubt in her voice. "It's just not who you are."

"You really believe that?"

"Of course I do," she answered seriously. "I wouldn't say it if I didn't."

It was at this moment that Albus Dumbledore rose from his chair at the High table and raised his hands for silence. It took a moment but eventually the Hall grew quiet. Dumbledore smiled to the school in general.

"Welcome back to another term at Hogwarts," he said warmly, his gaze passing over them all briefly. "A few start of term notices before lunch ends. In the light of recent events, until further notice, Hogsmeade weekends are cancelled."

Almost instantly a wave of angry whispers broke out amongst the years of third and up. Dumbledore gave a moment, before continuing. "It is for your protection. The war is starting to affect us in many different ways. Indeed it appears Hogwarts is one of the only safe places left in our world. That's not to say Hogsmeade weekends are gone forever. If it is deemed safe by the staff and myself, they may still go ahead."

There was a grumble of agreement from the population of the Hall. They weren't happy, but it was how it had to be. "On a lighter note. Our Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher, Professor Moody." Dumbledore gestured to Moody, sitting halfway down the table next to Trask. "Professor Moody has agreed to teach an extra class every Saturday afternoon. Students of fifth year and above are encouraged to take part in these defensive lessons." He looked around the hall one more time

fondly. "Thank you, that is all."

Everybody returned to their conversations, a little more gloomily as Hogsmeade had been cancelled. Harry heard a few people questioning the appearance of the six strangers sitting up at the table, and why Dumbledore hadn't given an explanation as to why they were here. Harry was glad he hadn't, it would only give the hall another reason to talk about him. That thing about safety was good though. Voldemort wouldn't hesitate to attack Hogsmeade if he couldn't get Hogwarts and would most likely raze both of them to the ground if he had the chance.

Later that night the common room was alive with start of term excitement. Friends discussed their Christmas' with other friends, exchanged forgotten Christmas presents, and avoided looking Harry in the eye. Harry was sitting in his chair by the fire with Ron and Hermione, they were just talking but Harry could see people looking at him out of the corner of his eye. It was annoying really, for when he looked up they turned away quickly and pretended they hadn't been staring at him.

Some people did talk to him though. Seamus, Dean, and Neville sat by the fire with them for a while, but Dean had asked where Ethan was and the conversation had taken a dive right there, and eventually sunk. Harry told them what happened after which they left, looking quite shaken. Parvati and Lavender came and said hello, and as Harry was walking up to the common room earlier on, Luna Lovegood had stopped him on the stairs and told him he would win because he would. It hadn't made much sense.

There was also some excitement over Moody's extra class on Saturdays. Many people had already signed up. Ron and Hermione had, but Harry had refrained, not entirely sure if it would effect his training in any way. He didn't know what to expect as of yet, so anything could happen.

"If it's anything like the duels we've been doing in class," muttered Ron, staring lazily into the fire, Hermione's head resting on his chest. He was absently making circles with his hand on her shoulder. "Then it shouldn't be too bad. In fact it should be fun."

Harry sat in the armchair opposite them, smiling slightly. They did look happy, despite all the darkness and pain that he brought into their lives

they still managed to fall in love with each other. *Well it was bound to happen sooner or later* he told himself. *They've liked each other for years...*

"I don't think it's meant to be fun, Ron," whispered Hermione. "It's for some extra protection against Death Eater's."

"Still, if Malfoy's there." Ron made a gesture with his wand. "Zap!"

Harry laughed and Hermione giggled slightly. "He was his usual charming self in the Entrance Hall this afternoon," said Harry.

"What did he say?" asked Hermione.

Harry sighed with exhaustion. "Just empty insults. Nothing important," he ended stifling a yawn. The clock above the fireplace told him it was nine o'clock. "I think I'm going to head up to bed. Don't want to be tired tomorrow," as he said this Harry pulled out his DA coin from his pocket. With a wave of his hand he set the time and date for seven thirty tomorrow night. "Night, guys," he said, beginning to walk towards the stairs.

"Night, Harry," whispered Ron, cuddling in closer to Hermione.

Harry dreamt that night. He saw himself standing alone on a bridge to nowhere, an unimaginable number of stars looking down on him in the impenetrable darkness that was the cosmos. For there part most were white, but in the very deepest reaches of the sky, a single red star shined strong. The planet of War, the planet Mars. He tried to hide from it, but the darkness stretched on to forever in all directions, there was nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. War was written in the heavens and Harry couldn't escape it if he wanted to.

With a start Harry opened his eyes and awoke from the dream. Standing over him, with a wand held alight stood a familiar face. It was still dark in the room, which meant sunrise hadn't yet happened. "Wake up, Harry," said a voice in the darkness, the only light coming from the speaker's wand, which wasn't even to highlight his face.

"Is that you Trask?" Harry asked sleepily, his bones protesting their early use as he struggled to sit up.

"Aye. Come on, it begins today, Harry. It's time to meet everyone."

Harry sighed and stretched his limbs in the darkness. With a shake of his head he got out of the bed and put on his glasses, followed by wand holster. "What time is it, Dernas?"

"Five," came the one worded reply from the door. "From now on this is your getting up time. It won't do well to waste precious training time asleep."

"I happen to enjoy sleeping," Harry mumbled wistfully, pulling a clean pair of robes over his head. Now that his eyes had grown used to the darkness, he saw the other four beds in the room. All the curtains were drawn, their occupants still asleep. *Some have all the luck...* he thought.

Harry followed Dernas down through the castle. It was so early that Harry doubted that anyone else would be awake. It was quiet in the early hours before dawn, the slight rustle of his clothing amplified loudly as it echoed down the dark corridors.

Trask led him down the steps of the Entrance Hall, and seemingly towards the Great Hall but instead veered away to the left and headed for one of the disused classrooms of the ground floor. Dernas pushed open the creaking door and light from inside spilled onto the dark stones outside the room. There was a murmur of voices from within that died down as he and Trask entered.

There were eight people in the room, including Dernas and himself. Harry only recognised the tall man in the back, standing next to a roaring fireplace. Albus Dumbledore. The other six people in the room didn't say anything as he entered. They began looking him up and down, and two of the witches smiled warmly at him. One of the wizards had a piercing gaze and he sighed as his eyes fell on Harry.

"Good morning, Harry," said Albus Dumbledore. "Let me introduce you to the people who will be helping you advance your magical education to the next level."

Harry nodded and Dumbledore pointed to a witch on the far right. She had shoulder length wavy blonde hair and didn't look that old. "This is Grace Arnair, Harry," began Dumbledore. "She will be teaching you unique charms and healing spells."

"Hi," smiled Harry, nodding to the witch.

"Good morning, Mr. Potter," she smiled in return.

"Standing next to her is Rose Appleton." She was a small witch with long straight brown hair and deep blue eyes. "She will help you with Magical tuning."

What's that? thought Harry, but refrained from asking and said hello to the women.

"Derms you know," continued Dumbledore. "Next to him stands Siamus Scrapfold. He will be your physical trainer, Harry."

Siamus nodded once briefly to Harry, his gaze piercing him the whole time. Harry instantly tagged him as a man not to be crossed. Even with his robe on Harry could tell that he was quite muscular, and very fit.

"This is Minra Algren, Harry," Dumbledore pointed to an elderly witch with a glare to match Snape's and a strict look to match McGonagalls. She nodded to him once briefly. "She is the world's leading scholar of pure magic, and the theory behind that."

Yes thought Harry. He may finally get some answers to the power of his magic, and how and why it differed from others. "And finally, Harry. Meet Thomas Fright. He will be teaching you some highly advanced offensive and defensive magic."

"Nice to meet you," said Harry.

"And you, Potter," nodded Fright.

Dumbledore gave them a moment, before speaking again. "Well, Harry, it begins today. I want you too know that this will not be easy. These people are the best at what they do. Your physical, mental, and magical abilities are going to be stretched and pushed past the highest levels of

endurance." There was a glint of worry in Dumbledore's eyes. "If you do not want to go through with this, now is the time to say so."

Harry stared at each face in the room separately. He saw compassion, worry, confusion, and amusement on some of the faces, and in the end he came to rest on Dumbledore's. He thought of the prophecy, he thought of what Firenze had told him, and of last night's weird dream, he finally thought of Voldemort and all the pain and anguish that creature had brought him. "I'm not going to back out," he whispered, but the power in his voice made his words heard. "If it's my destiny to fight him, I want to be able to stand a chance of winning."

Dumbledore nodded, he had expected no less. Harry's convictions were almost stronger than his magic. He would stick with this to the very end. "Well then I wish you luck, Harry. I'll leave you all to get better acquainted." Dumbledore walked from the fireplace over to Harry, placed a warm hand on his shoulder and smiled. He then exited the small room.

"Well," smiled Trask. "Who wants to sink their claws into him first? Miss Arnair, Algren, Appleton. Ladies first."

Harry smiled and Trask sent him a lopsided grin and wink. "I think we'd all like to know his capabilities before beginning," said Minra Algren. Harry remembered her as the pure magic scholar. "If this child does indeed possess high levels of pure magic, then I think it best I discover the extent of his talent before the rest of you begin."

That made sense thought Harry, though he didn't like her calling him a child. "Excellent," smiled Trask. "Come on then you lot. Let's leave them be." He then turned to Harry and tried to act serious. "But don't for a moment think you've escaped sword training today, Potter." He smiled mischievously, as he and the other four people filed out of the room.

Many of them shook his hand as they left, and smiled warm hellos. Harry responded as best he could, trying to remember their names. After a few moments it was just him and Minra Algren, standing in the light from the fire.

"Take a seat, Mr. Potter," she said emotionlessly, lifting a heavy bag

onto the table before her. Harry took a seat at this table, and sat there in silence for a moment as the elderly witch searched through her bag for something.

"So what exactly is pure magic?" asked Harry as she continued to search. The bag was enchanted to hold a lot more than its size allowed, so it was quite big on the inside.

"Pure magic, Mr. Potter," said Minra, frowning into her bag as something in there let out a low growl. "Pure magic is magic not channelled by a wand. It exists in every magical person, though only in very small amounts, almost undetectable amounts. It is this magic that allows a person to perform simple spells without a wand." She looked up at him at this point. "Though from what I've heard this rule doesn't seem to apply to you... A demonstration please."

Harry shrugged and levitated a chair across the room without a wand; he then summoned it to him and banished it back, all without his wand. "Very good..." she mumbled.

Harry fell silent as she dug deeper into her bag, and this time smiled as her hand's grasped some unseen object. With a mild curiosity Harry watched as she pulled a clear spherical object out of the bag and placed it on the table with the dull resounding sound of glass hitting wood.

"What is..." he began.

"This, Mr. Potter, is something I invented. I call it the Seeing Glass, not a very original name I know, but it describes it well." Harry stared at the glass ball. It was about the size of a Bludger and completely transparent. It was held in place by four gold rods that were sealed in a half circle across the bottom. These bars stretched up across the glass but didn't quite reach the top of the ball. Harry was reminded strongly of a crystal ball, but this was too big for that, and served an entirely different purpose.

"What's it do?" asked Harry, seeing his reflection in the glass dimly.

"It can measure the amount of magic a person possesses....or more accurately the amount of pure magic a person possesses. It displays it

as a silvery white liquid in the ball. The more liquid in the ball, the stronger the magic in the person." Minra regarded him for a moment before continuing. "I'll show you...."

Minra pulled the white cloth glove she was wearing off her right hand and placed it over the ball. She let it hover in the air for just a moment before placing her hand on the glass surface, above the supporting metal rods. Nothing happened.... until. The glass ball started to spin in its confines and a silvery substance, much like unicorn blood or a thought string of a pensieve, began to appear in the ball. It stopped in about three seconds.

"You see," Minra began, pointing to the small amount of silver liquid in the bottom of the sphere. It was about three teaspoons full. "That is the amount of pure magic in me, as you can see it is not very much, but compared to the average among witches and wizards that *is* a lot. With that amount I can cast spells as powerful as transfiguring animals into inanimate objects without the use of a wand to channel the magic. Dumbledore possesses about four times more than this, and I assume.... You-Know-Who would have quite a large amount as well."

Harry blinked and nodded with understanding. "Say Voldemort," he began and watched the slight nervous jump of her hands. "Can I try it?" he asked.

Without saying anything Minra Algren nodded and tapped the glass sphere once with her wand, which she produced with a flick of her wrist. The silver liquid inside the globe disappeared, leaving it empty once more.

"Now just place your palm on the surface like I did. You'll feel a slight stinging sensation but it's nothing to worry about, and none too painful. Don't remove your hand until the ball stops spinning," Minra told him.

Harry nodded, thinking about all the special wandless magic he had been doing this year. This talent was passed down from Godric Gryffindor himself. He remembered his magic exploding by the forest when he had learned of Padma's abduction. It had been so powerful it had reduced age old trees to ash. And finally he thought of the strength of the stunning spell he'd used back in Abingdon, the one that had taken out ten Death Eaters in a single blast. That was magic on par with

Dumbledore.

With a slight moment's hesitation, Harry raised his hand and let it hover over the globe for a brief second. Then with a deep breath, he placed it against the smooth glass surface of the sphere. For a moment nothing happened but then the ball started spinning under his hand, the smooth glass gliding under his skin effortlessly. He saw the silver liquid begin to form in the ball and he felt the slight stinging feeling.

Minra had had her hand on the glass about three seconds when it had started spinning, Harry was now on twelve. The glass spun harder and faster until the liquid in it was churning so fast it became a blur. Harry gasped as the glass became increasingly hot and the stinging began to get painful. It showed no sign of ending and when he saw Minra's eyes open wide in surprise and fear, Harry began to worry.

"Is it supposed to do this?" he asked, clenching his jaw as his hand burned.

"Remove your hand," ordered Minra shrilly.

Harry tried but it wouldn't budge. He pulled and pulled but only succeeded in lifting his hand with the ball still attached to it. Despite its size the ball wasn't very heavy. The small stinging sensation was now a deep intense burning sensation, and Harry cried out as the friction caused smoke to rise from his hand. It was that hot.

The silver liquid continued to form, and then began to turn a deep red, the colour of blood. Harry tried to shake his hand free, whilst Minra began muttering small spells. Neither of their approaches had the desired affect. *Damn it* thought Harry as the smell of his burning flesh reached his nostrils. He cried out against the pain and tears formed in his eyes. *To hell with it* his mind cried out to him. Harry stood, raising his hand with the ball attached as he did. With all his strength he raised his burning hand, complete with flaming hot ball, above his head and then with a desperate cry brought it crashing down back towards the table.

The force of the impact jarred Harry's arm. The seemingly fragile ball hit the table so hard it splintered the front legs and the table fell in on itself. The ball remained whole and intact, though. Harry fell to his knees from

the pain and began hitting the glass globe across the stone floor. It remained whole, not even a scratch upon its surface. Harry cried out again, cursing the ball that was slowly filling with a silvery red substance, and all the while his flesh burnt.

Chapter 21 - It Never Ends

History has demonstrated that the most notable winners usually encountered heartbreaking obstacles before they triumphed. They won because they refused to become discouraged by their defeats.

--B. C. Forbes

The force of the impact jarred Harry's arm. The seemingly fragile ball hit the table so hard it splintered the front legs and the table fell in on itself. The ball remained whole and intact, though. Harry fell to his knees from the pain and began hitting the glass globe across the stone floor. It remained whole, not even a scratch upon its surface. Harry cried out again, cursing the ball that was slowly filling with a silvery red substance, and all the while his flesh burnt.

"I'm afraid you're going to have to wait it out, dear," cried Minra, staring fearfully at the boy before her. The Seeing Glass was glowing with a silvery red radiance and was so bright it was almost blinding. "Good lord...." she breathed.

Harry rose to his feet, tears in his eyes and jaw clenched. He was just about to use the Reductor curse on his hand when just as quickly as it had started, the ball stopped spinning. He was breathing heavily when his hand disconnected from the now still globe, and fell to the floor noisily, bouncing once before coming to rest at his feet, entirely unmarked. The same couldn't be said about his hand though. Harry's entire arm was shaking as small wisps of smoke rose from his searing hot hand. Fearing what he might see, Harry slowly turned his palm up to his dread filled

eyes.

"Ah...." he sighed, sounding more regretful than actually hurt. His palm and the skin running up his fingers, the entire reverse side of his hand was pitch black and in places it was glowing red, like the dying embers of a fire as the wood cooled. It hurt beyond tears; it was more of a shock than anything else. He slowly flexed his fingers and cringed as the burnt skin flaked away. "What the hell just happened?" he croaked.

"Let me see, Mr. Potter," said Minra, having collected herself. She approached him with her wand drawn. "Oh come on now," she sighed as Harry shielded his hand from her. "I can heal it."

Harry frowned but found the mind numbing pain becoming too much. He presented his hand and heard Minra suck in a sharp breath at the sight of it. "That was not a small stinging sensation," he whispered, and the strict looking Minra smiled slightly, belying her character.

After a moment of studying it she took his hand in her own and placed her wand over the burnt flesh. Harry winced and turned away as she began muttering spells and rubbing her wand up and down his palm. "Sliver seam tux," she whispered, causing a jet of blue light to issue out of the tip of her wand and cover Harry's hand. It felt like his hand was encased in jelly. The blue 'gel' seemed to hover around his hand, swirling and shaking, before it sunk into the wound. Whatever the stuff was it rebuilt the destroyed flesh and Harry felt the pain subside dramatically. He chanced a look at his hand.

The first thing he saw was Minra sighing with relief. He then looked down at his hand and it was his turn to sigh. The black scorched skin had been healed, and replaced with raw pink skin. Harry balled his hand into a fist and winced as the raw skin flexed.

"It's going to need a bandage," commented Minra. She raised her wand and with a quick flick long white bandages shot out of the end and wrapped themselves around Harry's wounded hand, encasing it tightly from the tips of his fingers to his wrist. He couldn't move it. "Give it a day or two, Mr. Potter," said Minra, who was now staring at the glass globe on the floor with a frown.

"What happened?" asked Harry, having overcome the shock of his slightly cremated hand.

Minra Algren didn't say anything. Instead she levitated the glowing ball onto a near by table, and stared astoundingly at its contents. She looked from the ball to Harry, and nervously bit her bottom lip.

"What does it mean...?" he whispered, rubbing the bandage on his hand absently. He was astounded by the glass ball just as Minra was. She had told him that an average person had about four teaspoons of the silver liquid in the ball. Looking at the ball now he saw that it was about a quarter full with silver liquid, many times more than an average person. But that wasn't all. Lying on top of the silver pure magic liquid was a separate layer of reddish liquid that filled the rest of the ball. It filled the remaining three quarters, shining brightly and crackling in the glass. It swirled against the curved circumference of the ball, but it didn't mix with the silver liquid it rested on.

Harry let fall his wounded hand to his side as he stared into the amazing red of the ball. The pain had gone, thankfully, and it was now nothing more than an annoyance. "What's the red mean?" he asked Minra.

Minra stared into the swirling substance, before turning away and looking into Harry's eyes. Harry returned her stare. He saw doubt in there, mingled with disbelief. "It means, Mr. Potter, that you have the potential to become the strongest wizard of our age..." Harry remained silent, a slight waver in his eyes the only sign that he had understood Minra. "The red substance in there," she waved her hand over the globe. "Is magic you have yet to tap into, yet to touch. The silver liquid, your pure magic, whilst more than I've ever seen from a single person, is only a small percentage of the true power inside of you. You have only ever scratched the surface of your potential."

Harry sighed with a nod and fell back into one of the classroom's chairs. "And why did it burn my hand?" he asked, subconsciously rubbing his bandaged hand again.

Minra smiled grimly. "It appears the longer a hand is on the globe, the hotter it becomes. I've only ever measured it against," she blinked, "average people. The longest a hand has ever been tied to the globe

was five seconds, and that caused no more pain than the small stinging sensation I expected."

"So what can I do about it?" Harry asked, a little worried about the possible amount of power within him.

Minra tapped the ball with her hand and the liquid within disappeared. She seemed to be thinking about her answer. "Myself and the other five people you met this morning have come to train you, Harry. With time your magic will grow."

And what will I be then? he thought. *Powerful enough to defeat Voldemort. The hero everyone says I am? God...* There was the sound of hundreds of footsteps outside the room and Harry glanced at his watch to realise it was eight o'clock. He'd been here since five. "I'm going to breakfast," he grumbled, glaring at the ball. "I hope you found my 'talent' knowledgeable," he ended bitterly, standing up and beginning to walk away.

Minra didn't say anything as he left, she held her tongue. Harry didn't know why he'd sounded so bitter as he joined the crowds outside heading towards the Great Hall. *Maybe because it's only eight in the morning and you've already had your hand burnt to a crisp* he told himself. *No...* Harry knew why he was angry. It was what he had just discovered. His magic was more powerful than most and it was still growing.

"They all seem like nice people," nodded Harry ten minutes later, as he sat around the Gryffindor table with Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and Neville. "I mean they're here to help me fight."

Ginny frowned. "What happened to your hand?" she asked, spotting the bandage for the first time.

"I burnt it," answered Harry truthfully. "Some test that Minra gave me, to see how much magic was in me."

Hermione, Ron, Ginny, and Neville all remained silent. The conversations around the Hall going unheeded as the post owls descended upon the students. "What test?" asked Ron.

Harry shrugged. "Nothing much, just had to place my hand on this ball. It got a little to hot and burnt me." His friends remained unconvinced. They knew he wasn't telling them the whole truth. The disturbing truth in Harry's opinion, that he could become the most powerful wizard ever. "So... DA meeting tonight," he said, changing the subject.

"What will we be doing?" asked Neville.

Harry smiled. "You'll see." He had big plans for the DA, having been finalising said plans for the past week or so. *I wonder how it's going to be accepted?* Harry mused to himself, playing with the bacon on his plate.

Defend.

"It burnt my hand...."

Strike. Miss.

"What?"

Parry. Blow.

"The bloody thing nearly reduced my hand to ash."

Block. Strike.

"And that's why you should never touch another person's balls!"

"Sod off," laughed Harry, as he parried a second consecutive blow from Dermas. They were down by the lake, in the clearing next to the fire pit. He and Trask had been down there all morning, practicing swordsmanship.

"Tuck your left arm in, keep it parallel to the ground whenever you can," instructed Trask, before proceeding to wrap Harry hard on the knuckles with his stick.

"GOD DAMN IT...." cried Harry, dropping his stick and shaking his hand viciously.

"You're beginning to show some improvement, Harry," said Trask,

patting him on the back. "As I already said you have more determination than most."

Harry sighed. "Thanks, Trask," he nodded, sitting down on the wooden log.

"Don't worry about it, mate. Now did you get that book out of the library like I told you? The one on Godric Gryffindor." Dermas stared at him.

"Yeah, I did," replied Harry, fully aware that it was sitting up in his dorm in Gryffindor tower. He hadn't even opened it.

"Well what did you think of it? I thought it should've at least helped you overcome a few... inner demons." Trask swung his stick gracefully through the air.

Harry sighed again. "To be honest I haven't even opened it yet. Been a bit busy with everything."

Trask stared at him for a moment and then blinked. "You're missing something good in that book. It's one of the few in this world that actually leave a mark. It make's a whole lot of sense."

"You like to read?" asked Harry, rubbing his sore knuckles.

Dermas nodded. "If I had to choose between reading and swords, I'd choose reading. There is more power in words, than there can ever be in magic."

Harry fell silent for a moment. He had never known Trask to be so... *deep*. It was a side of him Harry felt was very rarely shown, to anyone. He was discovering a lot more about this man. "You should talk to, Hermione," nodded Harry. "She's absolutely is fascinated with books."

As Harry said this he looked behind his shoulder and saw across the grounds. By Hagrid's hut stood the sixth year Gryffindors and Ravenclaws taking Care of magical Creatures. He could just make out Ron's flame red hair from where he was, studying the Chimera Hagrid had had imported. He turned back to Dermas.

"Ready to go again?" he asked.

"Sure-"

"Excuse me, Dernas," said a voice to Harry's right. He turned and saw Rose Appleton, one of his trainers, standing on the small rise of the embankment that ran parallel to the road.

"What can I do for you, Rose?" asked Trask, standing and smiling.

Rose smiled and Harry thought he saw something in her eye as she looked at Dernas. "I was hoping to steal Harry from you," she said, quickly glancing at him. "Minra told me something fascinating and I'd like to begin his magical tuning."

Dernas grinned. "I don't know," he said slowly. "What do you say, Harry. Would you rather stay here with me?" He twirled his stick menacingly. "Or head on back up to the castle?"

Harry laughed, fully aware of his throbbing knuckles. "I think I'll head back up to the castle."

Rose laughed at Dernas' pouting and Harry stood up, he walked over to her. "You're welcome to come as well," Rose said to Dernas.

"Excellent," cried Trask, his strong Irish accent ringing clearly across the grounds. He bounded across to Rose and looped her arm in his. Harry fell in line with them as they began to walk back up to the castle.

As they walked the cool January breeze blew across the castle grounds. It stirred the trees and Harry wrapped his cloak around himself to keep out the cold. Snow had fallen again last night but the sky was clear now as he waded through the shin deep white powder. Trask and Rose laughed and talked happily ahead of him as they walked. Harry thought they may have been old friends and from the way Dernas was carrying on, more than that at one point.

They entered the castle and all was silent. The entire school was quiet as lessons were in progress. Harry followed Rose and Dernas across the expanse of the Entrance Hall and over to one of the disused classrooms of the ground floor. The door creaked on its hinges from disuse as they entered and Harry coughed from the dust in the air.

"This won't do," said Rose, pulling her wand out of her robes with a shake of her head. Without saying an incantation she waved her wand and ever speck of dust in the room rose off whatever surface it clung to and flew out of the open window and up into the cool air.

"Nice," commented Dernas, sitting himself in one of the old chairs. Harry sat next to him.

"Right now," began Rose. "Let's begin with the obvious. What is magical tuning?" She looked at Harry.

Harry shrugged. "I've never heard of it," he confessed.

Rose nodded. "Not many have. It is a very obscure and advanced branch of magic that few ever bother with. It is incredibly difficult, but extremely useful." Rose paused but Harry held her gaze.

"This is the exciting part," whispered Dernas.

"One of the many aspects of magical tuning is using your mind to control magic," began Rose. "There are basically three levels of magic."

"And what are they?" asked Harry.

Rose smiled. "Wand magic," she flicked her wand again and the desk to Harry's left was levitated up into the air. She spun it a few times before bringing it back down to the floor. "Wandless magic," Rose continued, again levitating the desk only this time using her hand.

"This is my favourite," whispered Trask, leaning over and punching him playfully on the arm. "Here it comes...."

"And finally," began Rose. She put her wand in her pocket and her arms hung loosely to her sides. The chair that Dernas was sitting on suddenly and unexpectedly lifted seven feet of the ground and began to spin around the classroom. Trask grasped it as hard as he could, his white robes bellowing out behind him.

"Damn it, woman," he cried.

Harry laughed but it instantly gave way to confusion. No one had uttered a spell or used a wand. There had also been no hand gestures from

Rose. It wasn't wandless magic. "How?" he asked turning back to Rose, who was smiling and following Dernas around the classroom with only her eyes.

Rose blinked and Dernas came safely back down, laughing as his stool touched the classroom floor. "Thought magic, Mr. Potter. The strongest magic in existence is magic of pure thought."

"You mean you just 'thought' the levitation spell, and levitated Trask!" Harry said astounded.

"Indeed," smiled Rose. "It is incredibly difficult and most magical folk don't bother with it, as a wand is much quicker to work with and most of the time more effective."

Harry found he agreed with that. "Then why bother to practice it at all?"

Rose's face hardened into a mask of seriousness. "We are all familiar with your... life, Mr. Potter. If you ever lose your wand, Thought magic can be an amazing weapon against dark wizards and even You-Know-Who."

Harry nodded. "Call him Voldemort," he said absently, fiddling with the bandage on his hand. He saw Rose twitch at the name, but Trask didn't. "His power comes mostly from fear. Don't fear the name. It's only helping him in the long run."

A silence fell on the room for a moment and the shadows seemed to darken. That was until Dernas spoke. "That's right," he joked. "I don't call him You-Know-Who, mostly I just call him Bastard."

Harry laughed again and saw a smile playing around the corners of Rose's mouth. "Well as I said," continued Rose. "It is incredibly difficult. It has taken me years of study to get to where I am in the art today. Though you will be practicing everyday," she ended.

"Can we start now?" asked Harry eagerly. He saw the advantage of having another means to use magic.

"I don't see why not, but be warned that you probably won't achieve much, if anything at all."

Harry nodded with understanding as, with a quick wave of Rose's hand, a feather appeared on the desk before him. "Now what I want you to attempt, Harry, is to levitate that feather. Make it rise off the desk without a wand or any gestures with your hands. Through pure thought make that feather fly around the room."

Harry stared intently at the feather, forcing his will upon it, telling it to float. Nothing happened, the feather remained completely still. He tried again, telling the feather to rise, commanding it to. Again nothing happened. Beads of sweat appeared on his forehead as he tried to direct some of his power into making the object rise. The minutes ticked slowly by. Harry vaguely heard Dermas talking with Rose but his entire concentration was upon making the feather float.

"It's impossible," he sighed, throwing his arms up and leaning back. He stared angrily at the feather.

"It's all right, Harry," whispered Rose. "No one gets it their first time."

"I don't see what I'm doing wrong?" he mumbled, asking for help.

"Minra told me your pure magic levels were... high," Harry nodded as Rose continued. "Try and tap into that power. Use emotion if you have to, it governs our magic more than rational thinking. Find it and then direct it towards what you want to achieve."

Harry sighed heavily and ran a hand through his hair. He had no idea how to tap into his power. *It's just there when I need it* he thought. *I've never been able to use pure magic whenever I wanted.... That's not true* he continued *every time you use wandless magic, that is done with pure magic*. With a renewed determination Harry stared at the feather intently.

He repeated the words of the levitation spell in his head. *Wingardium Leviosa...* Over and over again he tried, but to no avail. Time passed slowly as his entire thought was bent upon the feather and getting it to rise. He searched deep for his magic, looking for that familiar warm feeling that his magic held. There was nothing. It was as if he had no magic. Harry began to get frustrated at his lack of progress.

Emotions he thought. *Use emotions...* Anger had served him well in his more recent battles. At Abingdon it had allowed him to conjure an impassable shield, and have the strength to levitate a bus. He thought about that attack and the countless dead, shot down defencelessly. A quick Avada Kedavra curse that had killed so many. He saw Ethan in his last moments of life. His mind flicked further back and Harry closed his eyes as he saw the Diagon Alley massacre through the eyes of his enemy. Further back and the Dursleys last moments of life before Voldemort destroyed number four Privet Drive. Back only a few weeks from there and he saw the curse that knocked Sirius back through the veil. Bellatrix Lestrange had been responsible for that one.

All of these thoughts enraged him, causing the reaction he had desired. His pure magic was bubbling inside of him and Harry opened his eyes quickly and the feather promptly exploded in a ball of blue and red flames. It scorched the desk as it was reduced to nothing more than black ash.

"Wow," muttered Rose. "A little too much... energy, Harry. Try and curb your force next time."

Harry was panting heavily as he began to calm down. That was the first time he had intentionally, purposely touched the deep well of magic that resided in him. If he was honest with himself what he saw and felt had scared him. He had called for the magic, it had responded. The only way he could describe it was as if he were standing on a small spit of land that was surrounded by a never ending ocean. Nothing but a dark horizon in every direction. The small spit of land was what made him Harry, his consciousness and the ocean was his magic. It was the first time he fully grasped the amount of strength and magical capability that resided in him. The power was limitless, untouched, just waiting for his use. And he had shied from it.

"God...." he whispered under his breath. He had suddenly developed a splitting headache, much like the one he received after a nasty scar attack.

"You okay, Harry?" asked Dermal.

"I'm fine..." mumbled Harry standing up with a hand on his forehead.

"Used a little bit too much magic..."

"That's an understatement," commented Rose. "Do you want to try again?"

Harry blinked to clear his head. He couldn't shake away the feeling that he was more magic than human. That he was just a tool of Fate created out of magic to destroy Voldemort. *No he thought, you are your own person. You were yourself before you even knew about magic!* That made sense he told himself, tried to convince himself that he was more than a weapon. There was still a shadow of doubt in the back of his mind. "I -er- I don't think I want to try again."

"That's probably for the best," she agreed, her gaze trailing over the scorch marks on the table. "But a routine is going to be developed soon. You're going to have to deal with all of us trainers all day everyday." She smiled at the end and Harry nodded back.

"Right then... I'll think I'll head back up to Gryffindor tower," he said, rubbing his tingling scar. "I'll see you later, Dermal. Thank you, Ms. Appleton."

"You're welcome, Harry, and it's Rose. Call me Rose."

Harry nodded. "Okay... I'll see you later."

One thing I learned during my childhood, which stayed with me for the rest of my life, was that my Fate was of my own making. No God, no man, no magic had control over me in the end. I was always more than Fate's warrior, it just took me one hundred years and a dead brother to realise that...

Harry was sitting in his favourite armchair by the fire, the soft glowing embers filling the empty room with much needed heat. It had just gone five and he was reading the book on Gryffindor that Dermal had said would help him. He had been there most of the afternoon, reading.

The book itself, he had discovered, was more of a collection of essays and notes written by Gryffindor himself, than a detailed script of his life.

Gryffindor had written it during his war with Slytherin and it discussed his feelings and emotions as he went through that.

From what he had already read, Harry found that his life bore a striking resemblance to Gryffindor's. Gryffindor was an orphan, he had had a rough childhood, and he had been the mortal enemy of a Dark Lord. He had questioned his worth in the world, and whether or not he was using his magic or his magic was using him. He continued to read:

November 15th 996

Today I discovered without a shadow of a doubt that the rumours were true. My brother has become my enemy. A war has begun and at its head are Slytherin and I. The unknown dark wizard has finally revealed himself as my life long friend. Above all I am angered by this betrayal, but I can't help but feel a deep sense of loss inside of me.

I never had a family. Helga, Rowena, and Salazar were my kin. He was the brother I had longed for in my youth. We were going to grow old together, teach magic to the coming generations.... I loved him, my brother. At times we were one soul and mind inhabiting two bodies. Evil ripped us apart, and then set us against each other.

I wonder now, as the news of more Muggle death arrives, if I could have prevented this. There were many signs over the years, his favouritism to purebloods, his anger and growing power. I suppose I was blinded, did not want to believe it was true, whilst all the while it was staring me right in the face. If I had seen... then thousands may still be alive.

Though I do not live in regret. I have lost friends, loved ones, as have we all to the monster that my brother has become. I will not drift through the unfairness of it all, cry to the heavens for a second chance. What became of my life happened for some greater purpose, I accept that and I also accept that not even the Gods can change the past.

I cannot hide from it any longer. I did not want to believe and thousands are lost for that mistake. I do now believe that Fate has chosen me, given me the power to kill my brother. It seems an impossible task and may yet prove to be....

Harry slammed the book shut and slipped it down the side of the armchair; he had had enough for now. It had certainly left him thinking, though, as he rose from the armchair and began to head down to the Great Hall for dinner.

Gryffindor had been as scared of his power as well... thought Harry, and had overcome it when he realised there was nothing he could do....

His thoughts took him all the way to the Great Hall and gave him some concept of acceptance. Harry entered the Hall and found a spare seat along the filling Gryffindor house table, next to Ginny who smiled warmly as he sat.

"How was your first day?" asked Ginny, referring to his training.

Harry blinked. he hadn't done much by the way of training. A bit of thought magic, which turned out to be a disaster, and some sword training with Trask. Though he had had his hand burnt to a crisp. "Different," he finally said, rubbing his bandaged hand. "Coming to the DA meeting tonight?"

"Of course," she said, genuinely excited. "We're all dying to know what you plan on doing." She was subtly asking him.

Harry grinned. "You'll have to wait and see, but rest assured everything is going to change."

Harry was hungry after the day's events and when the food appeared he dug into it ravenously. He had just piled his plate with roast potatoes when Ron and Hermione arrived.

"It sounds... evil," muttered Ron as he sat down. Hermione sat next to him.

"No it doesn't," she laughed. "Just... difficult."

"He expects us all to be able to conjure a patronus by the end of the term!" cried Ron.

"What's this?" asked Harry.

"Moody wants everyone who has signed up for his extra defence

lessons to be able to conjure a patronus..." said Hermione.

"By the end of term!" added Ron sourly.

"Well what's wrong with that?" began Harry. "Hermione can do it. Ron yours is coming along well and will probably have a proper form soon. Ginny you're doing good as well." Harry had been meaning to spend more time practicing the Patronus charm in the DA, but other more offensive spells had taken its place. A problem he would soon fix. "We'll spend some more time on them in the DA."

"Tonight?" asked Ron.

"Not sure if there'll be enough time tonight, but we'll see."

After dinner Harry, Hermione, Ron, and Ginny headed up to the Room of Requirement. The meeting didn't officially start for half an hour so Harry wanted to use that time to put together what he was going to say. There were a lot of topics he was going to breach this evening, and probably a few won't be overly accepted by the group. He wanted to make sure he had enough argument to enforce his ideas and in the end sway most of the group his way.

He had no doubts that a few would object, but he had a few tricks up his sleeve. Zacharias Smith would undoubtedly be his usual sarcastic self, but hopefully too many others wouldn't argue. What he had planned was important, especially for the safety of everybody in the school.

As soon as the clock struck seven thirty members began to arrive. The first through the door were Neville and Luna, hand in hand. Harry smiled slightly but didn't mention it to anyone. He looked across the room and saw Ron and Hermione talking quietly on one of the bigger bean bags, they seemed very close at the moment and Harry thought he'd leave them be. Ginny was examining the dark detectors on one of the many tables.

More and more members began to arrive and in the next ten minutes, everyone was accounted for. After Neville and Luna came the Patil twins with Lavender and Harry gave Padma a small smile, which she returned.

They were followed by Seamus, Dean and Justin Finch-Fletchley who shook Harry's hand as they entered. The rest of the members arrived at the same time a few minutes later. Susan Bones, Terry Boot, Michael Corner, Colin and Dennis Creevey, Anthony Goldstein, Ernie Macmillan, and Zacharias Smith.

Also, as Harry had asked her after dinner, Cho Chang had arrived with Michael Corner. He felt no anger or resentment towards Cho. She hadn't known her friend was going to betray them, and Harry didn't hold it against her. She was Head Girl now as well, and Harry knew she would be an important part of his plans. She didn't know that though and gave Harry a small nod as she sat down next to Michael.

That's everyone thought Harry as he took his place up the front of the group. Before he spoke he looked out at the group in front of him. He immediately missed Ethan from the crowd and realised that most wouldn't have realised he was gone. The group itself wasn't as big as Harry would have liked now things were stepping up in the war. If he wanted to make the castle safe he was going to have to increase membership. But that led to questions of loyalty and mistrust, but he had a solution to that as well. He noticed that several people in the group were looking at him with what bordered on reverence. Harry assumed they had questions, and would let them ask a few.

"Okay," he began, rubbing his hands together. "Good evening. I'm glad everyone could make it tonight, as I'm planning on making some big changes."

Every eye on the room was upon him as he spoke. Even his friends were interested in what he had to say, as he had guarded his plans closely. "But I know from the looks on your faces that you're all dying to ask me some questions. So go ahead now."

There was surprise for a moment in the room as most had never known Harry to be so open and straight forward. After the initial shock was over, everybody seemed to be waiting for someone else to ask the first question. There was an awkward silence as Harry quietly paced up and down the room. Eventually someone spoke up.

"Is what the *Prophet* wrote about you true?" asked Cho.

Harry stopped pacing and stared deep into Cho's eyes for a moment and thought about his answer. If he explained it now then it would be all over the school by tomorrow afternoon... but that was what he wanted, to show people that someone was destined to take a stand. "Every word of it," he began quietly, his voice void of emotion. "The prophecy they printed, the explanation they gave. It is, without a doubt, correct. I will face Voldemort at the end, and only one of us will walk away."

Silence was absolute in the room and among the crowd as they processed what Harry had said. Some were looking at him fearfully, while others (such as Zacharias Smith) were looking at him like he was crazy.

"Any other questions?" he asked, putting on a brave face.

There was a moment given and Harry was about to carry on with his plan, when someone spoke. "Is it true you were at that attack in the Muggle city?" squeaked Dennis Creevey.

Harry turned to look at him as a thousand images of that disaster in Abingdon raced through his mind. He saw mostly Ethan slowly dying. "I was there," he nodded, but gave no further explanation. Ron and Hermione smiled knowingly from their bean bag up the back.

"My aunt," began Susan Bones, but stopped when Harry turned to look at her. He nodded and after a moment she continued. "My aunt told me that you caught twenty Death Eater's single handily... is that true?"

Harry remembered Dumbledore telling him that those Death Eater's had still been stunned as the Aurors arrived on the scene over three weeks ago now. They had been interrogated and were now incarcerated in Azkaban. Voldemort would probably try and break them out soon, if they were important enough. He nodded and many of the group looked at him with admiration. "I got lucky," he said. "Okay... enough questions."

A few people looked like they might want to ask some more questions, but saw the look on Harry's face and decided against it. "Right, time to start things then," he whispered to himself. "I'll start again now a few things are out of the way..."

Harry surveyed the crowd a moment and then began. "Welcome to the first Defence Association meeting of the new term. I'm sorry to say we won't be doing anything defence wise today." Everybody immediately looked down at this. "But we will be doing something as equally, and maybe even more important that that at the moment."

Harry paused to let the seriousness in his voice sink in. He continued soon after. "Death Eater spies are absolutely everywhere in our world. I'm fairly sure there are quite a few here at Hogwart's. There are undoubtedly Death Eater sympathiser's in the school as well." Another moment to let it sink in. "Now... what I'm about to suggest is *real*. It may be dangerous and it will give every single one of you an active role in the fight against Voldemort."

Nervous glances were being exchanged between the group now. Not even Ron and Hermione knew the full extent of Harry's plans and this was new to them. "From this meeting forth," Harry continued, "the DA will no longer be just a small club, a group of friends learning defence. From this meeting forth we are going to become a force to be reckoned with. From this meeting forth everything will change. We are going to operate within the school grounds. Highlighting dangers, solving problems and, most importantly, discovering how strong of a grip Voldemort has on our school and breaking that grip. In a sense we are going to become protectors of those who can't defend themselves. Let the student population know that Hogwarts is their's and if they are scared or worried for any reason, the DA is there to help."

Harry ended his speech here for a moment to see what effect this had on the group. It was slow at first, and the nervous glances between one another continued. But slowly, Neville started to clap and then everyone joined in. Harry inwardly sighed with relief, although he didn't show it, he was quite nervous.

"Thank you," he shouted raising his hands for silence. It still surprised him when the group obeyed. "But what I've just said is only the beginning of something much greater...." Harry paused there, and finally came to a decision. "Did any of you realise that are number is one less than what it should be?" He was referring to Ethan and from the sudden looks around at each other, no one had noticed. "Ethan Rafe... was killed over

the Christmas break by... by Voldemort."

The effect that had was instantaneous. A collective gasp rose from the entire group (except Ron, Hermione and Ginny) and many covered their mouths in shock. "It wasn't mentioned earlier or by Dumbledore for reasons that are our own, but he is dead. I was the last person to see him before the end; I was with him as he died." Harry was carrying unshed tears in his eyes. "Ethan... kept many secrets and I'm sorry to say he paid the ultimate price for that. The DA will make sure that no student has to keep things locked away like Ethan did. We are going to train in both defensive and offensive magic and in time become the elite of the school, the protectors. Our group is going to become official. As students we hear a lot of things the professors don't. It is important that we use that information to drive Voldemort out of this castle forever."

The clapping was scattered this time, as some had a sceptical look upon their faces. This was where Harry would have to do his convincing, as he knew this was when the arguments would begin. Sure enough, once the clapping has died down, Zacharias Smith had something to say.

"How do you plan on doing this?" he asked sarcastically. "You're just a student like the rest of us."

Too easy thought Harry. "Haven't you been listening, Smith?" he began with a slight edge to his voice. "The DA is going to become official. That means we're going to send representatives to Albus Dumbledore and even the Ministry. We are going to be recognised as a capable fighting force, designed to protect Hogwarts. This is what I meant, people, by taking an active role in the war. You will be learning all you can about possible Death Eater's in the school and you will protect any student in danger." Harry was starting to get annoyed with the nervous glances people were sharing. "If anyone thinks they're not capable of this, you may leave now. I won't stop you..."

No one moved and all of them had just appreciated how serious their position in the DA had become. Some of them had just realised that they would have to fight in this war sooner or later, if you wanted to belong to the DA it would be sooner. Harry wasn't finished yet though.

"To properly do this we are going to need to boost our membership

numbers. We are going to open up membership to anyone fifth year and above.... even Slytherins."

There was a moment of disbelief at this before the protests began. "Slytherin! You can't be serious?" shouted Ron. The shouts grew louder and Harry was struggling to make himself heard.

"Sonorus!" he whispered into his throat with his hand. "QUIET," Harry shouted and everybody in the room was immediately silent. Harry removed the sonorus spell. "Not all Slytherins are bad. Most just have the wrong idea and some would openly detest Voldemort if given a chance. Now, I'm willing to say that we will find Death Eater sympathisers in Slytherin and maybe even a few Death Eater's, but it won't be the only house. I personally know a Gryffindor who became a Death Eater and if it wasn't for him, Voldemort wouldn't have returned when he did." This shocked everyone in the room who didn't know the story of Peter Pettigrew. "You have all been blinded by years of house rivalry so I'm going to say it in plain simple English now. Not-all-Slytherins-are-Death-Eaters! They have just as much right to be in the DA as the rest of you do and it would be better anyway if we had a presence in each common room of every house. If you don't like it, there's the door." Harry waved his hand and the door to the Room of Requirement swung open. No one left, though and Harry closed the door.

"Before we continue now I want to make something very clear." There was no trace of emotion in his voice. "This is not a game. In the coming months and years you may be faced with fighting an enemy that will want to kill you. You will have to fight for our side in the war if Voldemort ever attacks Hogwarts. Is that understood? If he attacks you won't be hiding with the rest of the students, you will be facing his armies head on. I'll say it a final time now, anyone not comfortable with this may leave."

For the third time that night no one moved and Harry had to smile. "So be it..." he whispered, everyone heard him. It was then that Harry pulled out a sheet of parchment, about six feet long, from his magically enhanced pockets. "Everyone here has to prove their loyalty to the DA and to each other. This parchment is charmed so that only those who swear never to serve Voldemort or his Death Eater's in any way may write upon it. I ask

all of you to write your name now. I'll go first."

Harry required a desk with ink and quill for the task and no sooner had he thought of it, than a small wooden table appeared in front of him, complete with a bottle of ink and an eagle feather quill. Harry smiled and shook his head as he placed the enchanted parchment on the table. To everyone else it had looked as though he'd conjured it without a wand, no one mentioned it though and only Ron, Hermione and Ginny realised it was the room that had done it.

"I'll go first," he said again, inking the quill. "You each do what I do." He placed the tip of the quill on the parchment. "I, Harry James Potter, swear my loyalty to the DA and its members and promise never to serve Lord Voldemort or his Death Eater's in any way possible." A small shower of golden sparks flew out of the end of the quill and Harry wrote his name at the top of the parchment. He then turned back to the group. "Who's next?" No one moved. "Don't all rush at once...."

Hermione, Ron, Ginny, Luna, and Neville were the next to add their names to the list, and the other fifteen members of the present members soon followed. Harry was thankful that everyone was able to write their name. He didn't really have a plan if green sparks came out of the end of the quill, which was the sign that that person was lying and was already serving Voldemort somehow.

"Thank you," he said when everyone was seated again. "That's pretty much it for this evening; I told you it would be important. There are a few things, though, before we end it for tonight." Harry stopped and summoned a clean piece of parchment to him. Upon it he wrote the title, *DA*. "Now, there are a few issues which we need to be making a start on now. One of them being: who is going to go see Dumbledore and the Ministry, to tell them of our official status? I think it best if I do this one, if everybody agrees that is." Every person in the room nodded. "Ron, you can help me with that."

"Sure thing, mate," Ron said seriously from his bean bag at the back, as Harry wrote his and Ron's name on the parchment under the title, *Ministry/Dumbledore*.

"Next one is... recruitment. Who wants to find students, fifth year and up,

who would be fit to join the DA? Bear in mind we're looking for people with a good magical talent, and have no sympathy for Voldemort." Hermione, Ginny, Cho and, surprisingly, Zacharias Smith raised their hands for this.

"Good," nodded Harry. "That's a representative from each house, except Slytherin. I want you all to look out for potential Slytherin candidates as well." They nodded in agreement and Harry wrote the names down under the title of *Membership*.

"One more thing tonight and then we're done for now," Harry called, glancing at his watch he saw that it had just gone nine o'clock. Everyone should be back in their common room now. "Cho," Harry began, looking into her eyes, "as Head Girl you have more power than most students. That is, the professor's will listen to you as will most of the students. I want you to handle publicising the DA. I want you to let everybody at Hogwarts know that if they have a serious, Voldemort related problem, then they can seek out a member of our organisation."

Cho nodded and agreed to do it. With that done it was the end of the meeting and most people were now talking excitedly about the new responsibilities that came with being in the DA. Harry gave them a few minutes before speaking again. "Thank you all for showing that you're not afraid to fight. Voldemort may be getting stronger but so are we. If everything goes to plan then soon he won't have a grip on our school. Now, everything is going to be a little bit disrupted as we set things up, so we might not get onto any spell work for a week or two but it won't be neglected." Harry paused for a moment. "Well that's it for tonight then. I think it best that once outside you don't repeat anything said in this room, not until we're better organised anyway. Thank you again for coming and goodnight."

After Harry finished talking the room began to empty quickly. Most in the group had just realised the time and weren't looking forward to having to dodge Filch in the hallways. Harry shook everyone's hand on the way out and soon it was only him, Ron, and Hermione left in the room.

"I've got to say, Harry, that was most unexpected," smiled Hermione, giving him a tight hug. "But if anyone can pull it off it's you."

"What are we going to say to the Ministry?" asked Ron, looking slightly amused.

Harry smiled and playfully hit him on the arm. "We'll just tell them what I just said. It's going to happen one way or another, and I'd rather the Ministry acknowledge us than not. We will definitely hear things they won't. We'll make them see that we have value."

Ron shrugged and Hermione smiled. "You've been planning this for a while," she said.

"Ideas been playing around in my head, yes," Harry grinned. He was rather pleased with himself after the night's events.

Ron and Hermione began to move towards the door but Harry sat down at one of the tables. "Aren't you coming, Harry?" asked Ron as he reached and opened the door.

"What's the matter?" asked Hermione.

"Nothing," he said quickly. "Just have some training to do before I head back. You know, my special training. I'll see you in the common room about forty five minutes."

"Okay," nodded Hermione. "Don't be too long."

"I won't be," he replied as she and Ron exited and closed the door with a creak. It was quiet now that the room was empty. Harry didn't require it to be this big so the room made itself smaller and more accommodating. "Okay...." sighed Harry, dropping his hands to his sides after conjuring a feather. "Thought magic here we go."

Chapter 22 - Brace Yourself Against the Cold

Every area of trouble gives out a ray of hope; and the one unchangeable certainty is that nothing is certain or unchangeable.

--John Fitzgerald Kennedy

"I am here to teach you curse after endless curse, to push your magical abilities to the very limit. When I'm through with you, your magical arsenal will be rivalled by only a few."

Harry nodded attentively as Thomas Fright, his offensive and defensive magic trainer, outlined his plans for him. They were once again in the small unused classroom on the ground floor, next to the Great Hall.

"That said I will be teaching you some amazing defence techniques as well. Higher class shields, stunners, charms. Auror grade magic."

"Auror grade?" questioned Harry, raising his eyebrows. He was fairly sure that Voldemort fought at a higher level of magic than Auror grade. It would definitely take a lot more than Auror grade magic to defeat him.

Fright took Harry's question as simply surprise, and nodded quickly. "Yes, Auror grade. It will be difficult, and very high levels of magic will be involved..." Fright looked at Harry for a moment before continuing. "You'll make it," he said. "You have to..."

"Can we start now?" asked Harry, ignoring Fright's final comment.

"Excellent," nodded Fright. "Determination is one of the most valuable things a man can have in this world. I'll start today with a simple curse, but effective. The *Arcostis* curse."

Harry frowned. "Never heard of it," he said honestly. "What does it do?"

"It is an offensive curse which causes the victim to be temporarily disorientated. It completely takes away your sense of direction. To you, up is down, down is up. You look left you're actually seeing right. It isn't a painful curse, but is classified as such because it can be used so dangerously."

Harry nodded, thinking that Fright sounded as if he'd memorized that straight out of the textbook. *Which he may have done* thought Harry. "Sounds good. What's the incantation?"

"Easy one really. *Arcois*," Fright said.

Harry found the curse relatively easy, succeeding in producing a very powerful one on his third attempt. Fright was his test dummy, and the bearded man was smiling at Harry's quick progress.

"*Siocra!*" Fright whispered the counter curse and the room stopped spinning for him. "Excellent, Harry. Don't think I've seen anyone pick up this curse that quickly. What else do you know?"

For the next hour and a half Harry was drilled on curses and counter curses. Thomas Fright seemed to know exactly what Harry had learned over the years, everything from the jelly leg curse to the Unforgivables was revised. Most of it was already second nature to Harry, so he spent some time thinking about the DA.

The last meeting had been two nights ago, when Harry had laid down the law. He had been spending his time since then thinking about a way to get the DA to be taken seriously by Dumbledore, and the Ministry. The fact that Mr. Weasley was Minister would help quite a bit, but Harry couldn't help but think that most in the world would think they were some kind of joke.

Not if it gets out I'm the leader Harry mused. As much as he disliked his fame, it would help for this. *And he thought if we're properly equipped, then everyone will see we're serious.* He thought of the millions of galleons his vault now held thanks to Sirius. Twenty four million galleons. *I could use that money to fund the DA. Buy proper training equipment, books, defence items. I'm going to have to visit Hogsmeade.* Hermione had found a dozen people who would be interested in joining the organisation as well. Harry only knew a few of them by sight, but he trusted Hermione to pick the right people.

"The Blasting Curse?" questioned Fright.

"Reducto," Harry answered absently, still lost in his thoughts.

He had been practising Thought magic whenever he got the chance, and was surprised at how much control he had over the vast amounts of power inside him when he put it to a use. With a simple thought he could levitate anything up to the weight of an average book. *Rose will be surprised* he smiled to himself. When it came to other spells, though,

Harry was at a loss. He had tried an Incendio charm, to create fire, but nothing had happened. It confused him because there was no place for the magic to come from him. With a wand it came from the wand, and wandless magic it came from his hands, but with Thought magic he didn't know. He would have to ask Rose.

Harry had had his first lesson with Siamus Scrapfold that morning at five a.m. As Dermas had told him, 'Old Scrappy', was ruthless when it came to physical exercise. He had started off with some light stretches, and from there things had taken a turn for the worse. Harry had to lap the Quidditch pitch and carry weights until he fell in exhaustion. After two hours of torture, Harry had stumbled back up to the common room at seven, just as Ron was getting up.

"Shield charm?"

Harry jumped up with a start as there was a tapping on the window across the room. "*Protego*" he said as he walked over to the window and pushed it open. Hedwig jumped back off the sill and then flew gracefully into the room, circling the ceiling for a moment before landing on Harry's shoulder; one of her white feather's falling to the ground as she did.

Harry removed the small piece of parchment attached to her leg and muttered a small thanks. Wondering who could have sent him a letter using Hedwig, Harry unfolded the parchment and instantly recognised the untidy scrawl.

Harry,

Haven't been seeing much of you lately, what with your special lessons and all. How about tea at my house this weekend? Five on Saturday okay?

Hagrid

Harry smiled and placed the piece of parchment in his pocket. He had been meaning to go see Hagrid for awhile but had been too busy. He would make sure he went on Saturday.

"Nice owl you have there," said Fright as Harry turned back around, Hedwig still on his shoulder, pecking his ear affectionately.

Harry genuinely smiled at Hedwig as she rubbed her head across his cheek. "I know. Had her for five years now," he said, smiling at the memory of the day he had been given her in Diagon Alley.

A siren sounded in the distance which signalled the end of the period, and the beginning of lunch. With Hedwig still on his shoulder, Harry walked across the room, said goodbye to Thomas Fright, and walked through the old wooden door of the classroom and into the Entrance Hall.

It was packed with students slowly, and loudly, making their way into the Great Hall for lunch. After Harry nearly stumbled to avoid colliding with a group of Hufflepuff's, Hedwig flew off his shoulder in irritation and up into the rafters. Harry called after her but she was gone. *Oh well* he thought, and entered the Great Hall.

When Harry broke through the crowd and caught sight of the Gryffindor table, he saw Ginny sitting alone at the far end, hunched over something and writing quickly. Harry walked down the length of the table, ignoring the pointed whispers and stares he attracted almost constantly, and sat on the opposite side to Ginny. "Hi," he said, his goblet filling with pumpkin juice as he grasped it.

Ginny looked up from the table and smiled weakly at him. She then proceeded to quickly put away the book she'd been writing in. Harry glimpsed the cover of it as she did, *Everlasting Thoughts*. She was writing in the journal he had given her for Christmas, though seemed embarrassed that he'd seen her do it. Harry didn't mention it.

"How's your day been?" he asked.

Ginny relaxed, and pushed a wisp of her auburn hair back behind her ear. "Eventful. Accidentally melted my cauldron in Potions and the Krup I was walking in Magical Creatures nearly drowned in the lake." Harry smiled, and Ginny returned it. "Other than that everything's been fine. How about you?"

Harry blinked and absently twirled the ring Ginny had given him around on his finger. "Today's been hard. They've got me *exercising* at five in the morning and then having to remember every single curse I've ever

known or used." Harry tried to make it sound light, but the strain in his voice was evident.

Ginny noticed this and she frowned. "It will all help, though," she whispered quietly, mindful of all the other people now seating themselves in the Hall. "You want to have the best chance of- of...." Ginny trailed away and looked down.

"Of winning?" questioned Harry, an eyebrow raised.

Ginny just nodded silently, peeling an orange. She had never talked to Harry about the Prophecy, she didn't even know if Ron and Hermione had? And right now she understood just how hard it must be for Harry. *God how does he do it?* she thought. *How does he keep going, keep it all together....?* He had faced down Evil that would leave most quivering in fear. He had faced it down, and found himself better than it. Ginny glanced into his impenetrable emerald green eyes, trying, and failing, to read his feelings. All she saw there was a haunted look. He smiled at her as he buttered a slice of bread, and it didn't reach his eyes. She returned the smile anyway, realising that some things needed to be said, and others were best left unsaid.

"Harry," she began, meeting his eyes. "How do you feel?"

Harry blinked and then frowned. "Feel?"

"I mean right now. Right at this very moment."

Harry shrugged and took a sip of his juice. "Tired...." he answered evasively.

Ginny narrowed her eyes and shook her head. "You know that's not what I meant."

Harry nodded and then sighed. "I know... it's just... I don't like to talk about my emotions," Ginny sighed now. "Especially when I can't be sure that they're even mine," Harry ended quietly, Ginny heard him though.

She paused for a moment, she didn't know what to say to that. "You still feel You-Know-Who's emotions?"

"Voldemort," he corrected. "And yes. Just once or twice a day but its still there."

Ginny and Harry fell quiet, both of them lost in dark thoughts. "So... how's your training coming along," she said, trying to lighten the mood, knowing that he'd told her just a moment ago.

Harry was thankful for the subtle change of subject. With a thought he sent the apple in front of him up into the air. Ginny gasped. "How did you do that?" She hadn't seen a wand, or seen him move his hand.

"Thought magic," he whispered. "I can only do simple levitation spells so far, but with more practice...."

"That's amazing," exclaimed Ginny, really impressed. Her eyes were alight with excitement, but as they met with Harry's he saw that they turned dark. "How do you do it?" she whispered.

Harry was silent, he saw the double meaning in that question. It wasn't about Thought magic. Letting the apple drop Harry ran a hand through his hair to stall for time. *How do I do it?* he wondered. *Fight? Carry on? That's simple... I have someone to carry on for.*

"I'm not sure...." he finally answered quietly, the tables were quite full now but they hadn't reached their end of the table yet. "I suppose it's having something to fight for... someone to fight for," he ended quietly, giving her a meaningful glance.

Ginny's breath caught in her chest but her face belayed no emotion. *Could he mean...* she thought. "Harry-"

"Hey, mate," said Ron, sitting down next to Harry. Hermione sat down next to him. "Bloody hated potions. Now that you're gone Snape's having to find new ways to take points from Gryffindor. I lost five for completing my potion early!"

Harry only half heard what Ron was saying. Most of his attention was still locked on Ginny. She was about to say something when Ron had sat down, but now she just blushed slightly and sighed, before turning away. Harry waited a moment and then turned to Ron.

"I think we're going to have to go see Dumbledore tonight," he said. "Get the DA known."

Ron looked to be in thought for a moment. "All right, but you better do the talking. I've no idea what to say."

"Honestly," smiled Hermione, grasping Ron's hand tightly. "Just repeat most of what Harry said the other night."

Ron nodded. "How about this. You handle Dumbledore, Harry. And I'll talk to my Dad at the Ministry."

"Yeah that's good," agreed Harry. "You're still coming with me to see Dumbledore, though."

"What can I do for you two gentlemen?" asked Dumbledore, smiling as he took a seat behind his ancient mahogany desk. Fawkes let out a shrill note as he spotted Harry, and it warmed him through.

"We've come to talk to you about the Defence Association," Harry said, both he and Ron seating themselves in the plush chairs in front of the desk. The portraits of previous Headmasters watched them curiously, and Ron shifted under their gaze.

"Oh yes," smiled Dumbledore. "Marvellous idea that was. I believe we have Miss. Granger to thank for that."

Ron nodded under Dumbledore's twinkling gaze and Harry smiled slightly. "We've come to tell you that I'll be taking the DA to... a higher level." Harry paused here as Dumbledore raised an eyebrow. "What I mean to say is," he continued as Ron sat silently by, "is that Voldemort and his Death Eater's have a knack for getting into Hogwarts."

Dumbledore nodded and laced his old, wiry fingers together. "Sadly, yes. He has always found a way in if he was determined enough."

"He has," agreed Harry. "That's why I want to make the DA a protective organisation for the school. Fully funded from the money in my vault. A proper, equipped fighting and defence force to protect the school and

discover if Voldemort has any power here."

Harry stopped there and studied Dumbledore's face. The old Headmaster, as always, had an expression upon his face that was unreadable. After a moment he spoke. "And how do you plan to do this? I believe the DA holds only a little under two dozen members?"

Harry heard, with some satisfaction, that Dumbledore was deadly serious. He was taking their proposal seriously. "It does, twenty members in all. I've extended the membership, though. Anyone who wants to join from fifth year and above can, assuming they're loyal and can be trusted. I was thinking of increasing the membership to about one hundred."

"And does this include possibilities for members from the Slytherin house?" asked Dumbledore.

"It does," nodded Harry. "Though I don't expect many to join, maybe a few."

To this the Headmaster silently agreed, but he could think of one or two that would join if given the chance. "Very admirable, boys," he said, his blue eyes twinkling warmly. "I see there has been a lot of thought put into this."

"There has," replied Harry. "The war is really beginning to start. More deaths in the Prophet, more disappearances, and.... now the death of a second student at Hogwarts because of him." Harry thought of Ethan's dagger as he said this. "I want to turn the DA into an official organisation, protectors of the school, recognised seriously in the eyes of the professor's here and of the Ministry. We'll be a capable fighting force, ready to fight if Voldemort attacked the school."

Dumbledore seemed slightly troubled by this last statement. "You would have students face Voldemort's armies?" he questioned.

"I would," Harry answered instantly. "It wouldn't be the first time," he went on thinking of the Department of Mysteries last year. "But if he attacked I don't think the Death Eater's would even think twice about killing a student. This way at least we can fight back. One hundred

trained students are better than one hundred scared students."

"Agreed," nodded Dumbledore, his brows creased in deep thought. "And you are going to train all one hundred?" he asked quietly.

"Not directly," Harry said. "I'll have people to teach under me, but we'll mostly be learning defensive spells and duelling techniques."

Ron nodded at this and Fawkes sung quietly. Dumbledore seemed to be lost in thought for a moment before a smile broke out across his ancient face. "You never cease to amaze me, Harry," Dumbledore said honestly. "I officially recognise the Defence Association as a capable defence force for the protection of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. As long as you obey school rules, you have the full support of myself and the staff."

Harry nodded, in truth he had expected no less. "Thank you, Professor," he replied, standing as he sensed the meeting coming to an end, Ron and Dumbledore stood with him.

"I believe you want to present the DA to the Ministry, and therefore to the world at large?" questioned Dumbledore.

"Yes, we had planned to do that," Ron said finally speaking.

Dumbledore nodded. "Might I suggest building the organisation into something impressive before attempting this? I'm afraid many won't see the need otherwise."

Harry hadn't thought of that, but it made sense. "Yeah... yeah. I'm going to need to go into Hogsmeade soon. Tomorrow if possible. I want to purchase some equipment."

Dumbledore slowly nodded as he thought. "I would like for you to go with some protection, Harry. But most of the Order is away at the moment....."

"How about if Dermal comes with me?" asked Harry. Over the past few weeks he had come to trust Dermal Trask, the blade master.

"Very well," replied Dumbledore, moving around his desk and stroking

Fawkes gently. "I'll speak to Dermal later," Dumbledore paused here and surveyed Harry for a long moment. "Thank you, Harry," he said finally. "For taking a stand. The school needs to see that something is being done."

Harry nodded but didn't say anything, Ron shuffled his feet next to him and Harry thought it was time to go. "Goodnight, Professor," he said.

Dumbledore stepped forward and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Goodnight, Harry" Dumbledore replied warmly. "And goodnight, Mr. Weasley."

The next morning Harry woke early at his now routine time of five a.m. The darkness was heavy outside his window and he let out a huge yawn as he pulled on the robes he'd laid out last night.

After collecting his wand and placing it in the holster on his arm, Harry gave one final, wistful look at his bed before heading down to the common room. As it always was at this time, the room was deserted. Harry walked quietly across the silent room and headed out into the old, cold halls of the castle.

He had to meet Siamus Scrapfold in the Entrance Hall for his morning exercise. This would be the second time he'd have to do it and Harry wasn't looking forward to having to run around the Quidditch pitch with heavy dumbbells. Each corridor and staircase he passed was deserted, which was to be expected, and Harry found himself thinking of the Hogsmeade visit he'd be going on later today.

I'll need to by robes, special ones for the DA. Wand holsters maybe.... advanced texts on defence spells. As Harry turned a corner, the torch on his left magically sprang to life but that was normal, he came to the balcony above the entrance Hall and saw Siamus jogging on the spot by the door, his grey hair and sharp eyes taking in the whole expanse as his robes whirled up and down with him.

"Morning," called Harry, taking the steps two at a time.

"Good morning, Mr. Potter," Siamus answered, a small, uncharacteristic

grin on his face. "Look out."

Harry frowned and stopped walking, not understanding Siamus. It all became clear a moment later as he heard a cry behind him, and then something hard colliding with the back of his knees, sending him painfully to the floor. Harry had no idea what was going on, it felt like someone had just whipped him.

"Bugger," cried Harry, his wand instantly in his hand as he rolled onto his back to see who had hit him.

"Caught off your guard, Harry?" laughed Dermas, his training stick swirling dangerously in his right hand, an amused glint in his eyes.

Harry laughed in spite of himself. "You'll pay for that one," he groaned as Trask offered him a hand to get up.

"At the rate you're progressing with swordsmanship, I'd say I'd be paying for that one in a few months, minimum." Dermas swung his stick and Harry dodged it. "Very good."

"Are we done, gentlemen?" asked Scrapfold, still jogging on the spot. "Harry, Dermas will be joining us in the mornings from now on."

Harry turned to look at Dermas, who smiled goofily at him. "I'll be on my guard then."

Harry, Dermas, and Siamus exercised outside in the cool January morning for two hours. At the end of which Harry was exhausted. He had done half a dozen laps around the Quidditch pitch, carrying weights, and that was followed by push-ups and sit-ups. Yes, he was definitely looking forward to breakfast.

The Sun had risen as they'd been exercising and Harry and Dermas now made their way back up to the castle. Siamus had stayed to continue exercising, as he felt that he hadn't gotten nearly enough of a workout yet. Harry didn't argue, lest he be drawn into it as well.

"After breakfast, Harry," Dermas said, pushing his curly brown hair back out of his eyes. "We're going to sword train for a few hours and then I think you want to go into Hogsmeade?" he ended with a question.

"I do," nodded Harry, smelling the heavy moisture on the air as the early sunbeams warmed his back. "Time I bought the essentials...."

"What? Firewhiskey and wizarding cigars?"

Harry shook his head and laughed. "Not quite."

After breakfast in which Harry said a brief hello and goodbye to his friends, promising to see them later. He was back out on the grounds, down by the lake trading blows with Dermas in their clearing. Harry had progressed marvellously over the time he'd been learning to fight with Dermas and could now successfully parry most of Trask's blows.

Though try as he might, Trask was just too fast for Harry to be able to return a hit, and he always ended up on the cold ground. They trained most of the morning until the sun was high overhead at eleven o'clock. Harry's only lesson that day was Physical Combat with Dermas. On Wednesday he had it from dawn till dusk, but thankfully he was going into Hogsmeade soon.

"I think we should get going, Harry," Dermas said and Harry nodded. Dermas then threw his stick back to the ground. "I know you can Apparate," he winked. "So let's head to the gates and go from there."

Quarter of an hour later and Harry appeared with a small pop on the busy High street of Hogsmeade. His gaze instantly scanned the crowd for any threat and he saw Dermas doing the same thing as he popped into existence. There were several hundred people in the street and the wind blew heavily across the road and passed the thatched wooden cottages as they walked. Blending into the crowds, Harry and Trask agreed that the first place they should go to would be the Dragon Armourer two streets over. Harry had seen this shop once before, he'd passed it with Padma months ago when he'd needed some formal robes for his Order of Merlin ceremony.

The street it was on wasn't as busy as the High street, and Harry saw Dermas casting glances at people who they passed, his hand was surely grasping his wand in his pocket. The Armourer was exactly as he remembered it. The building was entirely black with dirty, grazed windows. A sign hung out from the door that read:

Elendil ***of*** ***the*** ***Finest*** ***Battle*** ***Armourer's***
Maker's ***Since 78 A.D.*** ***Wear***

Harry read the sign and was about to enter the shop when a sharp pop cut through the air to his left. He turned quickly, as did Dermas, but there was no one there. Indeed the street was almost deserted. Harry was sure someone had just Disapparated, and that was normal, if not slightly suspicious. He gave it no more thought. With a nod to Dermas they opened the black wooden door and entered the dark armour shop, the door creaking on its hinges as they went.

They first thing that hit Harry about this shop was the smell. It smelled strongly of leather, or more accurately, dragons hide. There were long columns of armour running the length of the store, brown dragon hide hung from the walls, ceiling and was piled on the floor. There were also a few stands that held robes, of all colours. Swords and knives were on display as well, and Dermas headed over to these display cases straight away.

The lighting in the shop wasn't that good, and it was very musty in the air. He was looking at the shields, complete with different crests, as a large man appeared behind him.

"Can I help you?" he asked gruffly, not that used to having customers in his shop. Harry jumped and turned, he hadn't even heard the man approach, which was amazing considering his size. He wasn't as big as Hagrid but he wasn't tiny either. He was about six and a half feet tall, had long bear like arms that were knotted with muscle, and a big bushy grey beard that hung halfway down his chest. He was bald and had sharp, piercing grey eyes.

Harry glanced over the shop and saw Dermas testing the balance on one of the swords, he turned back to what he assumed was the owner of the shop. "Can I help you?" he repeated.

"Er... yeah," began Harry. "I'm looking to buy some dragon armour. Top of the range stuff, doesn't matter what the cost is. And I'm looking to buy a lot of it."

The man frowned and looked Harry up and down, his eyes lingered on the scar for a moment and then he clicked his teeth. "I thought I recognised you," he said, extending his hand. "Good to meet you, Mr. Potter. My name's Marcus Elendil."

"Nice to meet you too," replied Harry, shaking the man's hand. "Interesting shop you've got here."

"Aye it is," agreed Elendil, placing his hands on his hips and looking absently around the shop. "You're after dragon armour, did you say?"

"I did," nodded Harry.

"And price is no problem?" Marcus Elendil asked, raising an eyebrow.

"None at all," assured Harry.

Mr. Elendil smiled now through his wiry beard. "Great. Not much call for my best stuff these days. But if you're willing to pay for it," he said, beginning to walk towards the store counter, Harry followed. "I have some of the strongest stuff ever made. From the hide of a Hungarian Horntail, died in its prime so the hide's harder than diamonds."

"Sounds good," said Harry.

"It is good," Elendil smiled to himself. "Right, take that robe off so I can get your size."

Harry nodded and removed his robe. He was wearing his everyday jeans and shirt underneath. Just as he put them down, there was a loud crash across the shop and Harry looked up to see Dermas quickly pick up one of the shields he'd just dropped.

"Er... is he all right?" whispered Elendil to Harry, as the tape measure began to gather measurements.

Harry smiled and inwardly laughed. "He's a bit... *touched* in the head, if you follow me."

Marcus did and chuckled slightly through his beard. "Right... hang on. I'll be back in a minute. Afraid blacks the only colour I've got this stuff in, that all right?"

"Fine," called Harry as Marcus disappeared into the back room from the door behind the counter. As he waited, Harry went over and talked to Dermas.

"Nice blades they've got here," he said, nodding to the display case holding four scimitars with golden handles.

Harry agreed and turned his attention to the selection of wand holsters on a rack above the display case. There were five in a row and all were made of the same hide, just different colours. *I'll need quite a few of them* he thought. *But I'll need measurements for every single person in the DA first....*

"Here we go, Mr. Potter," said Marcus as he returned, dropping a big bundle of black objects onto the display case in front of Harry that held the scimitars. "Boots, pants, cape, chest plate."

Harry nodded and picked up the chest plate. It was as hard as diamonds, harder even, completely black and held together by two straps of the same material joining it in place. Though it was fairly big, and very hard, it was feather light. Harry thought that he wouldn't even notice it when he was wearing it. "It's excellent," he exclaimed. He didn't know much about Dragon armour, but he could tell that this was some really good stuff.

"My finest work," mumbled Marcus absently. "Of course you probably won't be wearing the cape and pants all of the time, but the boots and chest piece will meld themselves to your shape over time. At first it may feel slightly stiff, but give it time and you won't know its there."

"I'll take it," Harry said.

Marcus nodded. "Now the chest piece you can take with you now, but the other items I've had in stock so long need some restoration work done to them. Okay if I send it on in about three days?"

Harry thought that that was for the best. "Fine. After I've paid for this, though, I need to discuss another matter."

Elendil nodded. "I'll ring all this up then. You can put the chest piece on now if you like, give it a chance to shape."

Marcus gathered up all the armour and carried it away to the counter, as Harry pulled his black shirt over his head. Just as he took it off Trask wolf whistled and Harry shook it off laughing. "Ouch," grimaced Trask, seeing the two scars on Harry's arm. One from Wormtail, the other from Voldemort at the Granger's. "How'd that happen?"

"Voldemort," was Harry's one worded answer as he unlaced the chest plate. After he'd undone all the knots on the black armour it fell apart into two separate pieces. Harry picked up the back piece and placed it on his back, leaning forward slightly so it didn't fall off. He then placed the front piece over his chest and joined the two. With a simple wave of his hand all the knots were tied, and Harry stood up to stretch the armour.

It was about one centimetre thick all around and Harry found it hard to breathe. "I think that's a little tight," commented Dermalas.

Harry agreed and loosened it slightly. It felt better now, and Harry found he could move just as easily as if it wasn't there. As was to be expected, it was a little stiff, but that would fix itself. With a satisfied smile Harry put his shirt back on and then put his black Hogwarts robes over that. Glancing in the mirror on the wall, he couldn't see any difference to his shape. The chest piece was light, and there was only a slight restriction as he moved. It was perfect.

Harry walked over to the counter where Marcus was waiting patiently. "Fits well?" he asked.

"Can hardly feel it," said Harry. "How much do I owe you?" he ended, pulling his money bag out of the magically expanded pocket in his robes. It held two hundred and fifty galleons.

"All of this," Marcus began, "because it's one of a kind and made from the strongest dragon skin available... It comes to one thousand five hundred galleons."

Harry felt his jaw drop but he fixed it quickly. "Damn," he cursed. "I don't have that much on me."

"S'll right," said Marcus, reaching for one of the many rolls of parchment in a box on the counter. "Gringott's Bankers Cheque," he said, unrolling

the parchment and handing Harry a quill.

Harry looked over the document and read it through. It was a simple cheque, much similar to that of Muggle's cheques. He wrote his name on the appropriate line, and then filled in the sum to be paid. He saw that the bearer section had already been stamped with Marcus' business name. After signing it and dating it, Harry handed the quill and cheque back over.

"Excellent," smiled Dermas. "We done then?"

"Not quite," Harry said, looking at his watch. It was coming up twelve thirty. "Mr. Elendil," began Harry. "I was wondering if it would be possible to be quite a few sets of armour from you?"

"Aye it would," nodded Marcus. "How much, and what are you looking for?"

Harry smiled. "I would like one hundred wand holsters, please."

Marcus' eyes widened. "That's... that's.... fifty galleons a piece.... five thousand galleons!"

Harry nodded. "That's not all either. I would also like one hundred sets of the armour you just sold me."

Marcus Elendil, a giant of a man, nearly fainted as Harry said this. Dermas couldn't help but laugh as he swayed on the spot. "You... you're serious, Mr. Potter?"

"Deadly so," replied Harry. "Would it be possible for you to come to Hogwarts in two weeks time, get all the measurements you need?"

Marcus leaned against the counter to catch his breath. "For an order that size I'm willing to do just about anything."

Harry smiled and extended his hand, Marcus took it. "Nice doing business with you. Just out of curiosity, how much is all this going to cost?"

"Well...." Marcus began quietly, obviously thinking hard and fast. "Good quality armour will set you back about a thousand galleons a set. Sadly I

don't have any material to make some to match yours, but I could get enough of a lesser dragon to make the quantity you want. I'd say about one hundred thousand galleons for all the armour and wand holsters." Marcus looked as if he didn't believe Harry would pay that, or even consider paying that.

Harry thought for a moment. Of the millions in his vault, that was barely two month's interest payments. "That's fine. I can expect to see you at Hogwarts then?"

Marcus nodded quickly, still disbelieving the order Harry had just placed. "I'll send an owl along with details and final costs and everything. Thank you, Mr. Potter," he said sincerely. "I'll see you in two weeks."

After leaving the Dragon Armourer's and a very excited Marcus Elendil, Harry and Dermas walked slowly back to the High street of Hogsmeade. Harry could hardly feel his new chest armour as he walked and he marvelled at how light it was. It was strong enough that he could be hit across the chest with a sledgehammer, and not feel it and yet it was so light.

As with all dragon products, this one had some magical properties. If Harry were to take a stunner to the chest or back, the armour would deflect it. It also blocked other spells but they were varied and depended on the strength of the spell.

The wind blew strongly as Harry walked passed an old, empty building with boarded up windows. Clouds threatened rain overhead and maybe even a little snow. It was almost February now; though snow could still be expected. Dermas walked along quickly with his hand in his pocket, a look of determination and mixed worry upon his face. After a moment of confusion at this Harry and Dermas separated in step to avoid a crowd of wizards, it was then that Harry saw something out of the corner of his eye.

He couldn't be sure, as it was just on the edge of his sight, but he thought he saw a man trying and failing to follow them and not be noticed. Harry knew this man, although he'd never met him. He had seen him many

times in his nightmare visions at night, standing with the Dark Lord as he murdered, tortured, and killed. He was a Death Eater, that much Harry was sure of, but whether or not he was following them remained unknown. Harry thought to mention this subtly to Dernas.

"Dernas," he began whispering, a warning tone in his voice. "There may-"

"I know, Harry," Dernas whispered back, his hand hard around his wand in his robe pocket. "Keep your eye's forward, we'll have to make it back into the more populated areas."

Harry stiffened instantly, his hand itching with magic. He kept as straight a face as he could as again he recognised another Death Eater across the street and up a bit, standing next to a torch post by a small thatched cottage. "He's not alone...." Harry said, barely more than a whisper. Trask quickened his pace.

Two minutes of quick, innocent walking and Harry and Dernas turned onto the busy main road of Hogsmeade. There were dozens, hundreds of people here but Harry couldn't relax, two Death Eater's was not coincidence. His mind jumped back to just before they had entered the Armour shop, he had heard a pop like someone Disapparating. *Could that have been a Death Eater? Gone to alert his master?* Harry didn't know, but he wanted to get back to Hogwarts, and fast.

Dernas was thinking the same thing, and his sharp eyes, which were most of the time full of laughter, now scanned the crowds coldly, efficiently, searching for possible threats. Fighting in the First Dark War had left him with enough sense to know when to be on guard. "Right, Harry, we're going to Apparate up to the castle gates," he whispered, pulling Harry out into the road, away from a crowd so they could Apparate safely. They were just outside The Three Broomsticks. "On three. Ready?"

Harry didn't hear a word Dernas said. His vision blurred and his ear's were filled with screams. He collapsed to his knees but wasn't aware of doing so, a fog passed before his eyes.

"HARRY!" cried Dernas, quickly removing his wand from his pocket and

grasping Harry's shoulder. "What is it? What's happening?"

Harry heard Dernas' voice only as a deep echo; most of the noise he heard was that of deadly screams. In some small corner of his mind that he kept for himself Harry realised what was wrong and why he was so cold. *No...* he thought *Not now....* He shook his head and this momentarily cleared his mind. The first thing he saw was Dernas' concerned face. "Dementor's," he croaked. "They're coming."

Trask blinked and gasped with a start. *That can't be right* he thought. *I don't feel a thing.* No sooner had he thought that than a chilling gust of wind blew into him, and through him. The sky grew slightly darker, as if heavy with enormous black rain clouds. "Oh shit," breathed Trask, beginning to feel the effects, though still unable to see the creatures. He was amazed that Harry could sense them so quickly, and realised a moment later what that meant. *Jesus, what has he seen?*

It happened a moment later, as more and more began to feel the effects of the soul sucking creatures, the Dementors. Dernas fell to his knees next to Harry, who had paled terribly and was breathing raggedly. More wizards and witches on the street began to feel the cold now. Then they appeared! Like a demon rising from Hell dozens of black robed creatures emerged from the darkest parts of the street. Creating rifts in the air through which they travelled, one after another they came. Fifty appeared in less than a minute.

Harry heard his mother's final screams, heard Cedric die, heard Ethan die, heard Sirius die, and saw brief glimpses of the worst moments of his life. Voldemort rose reborn from the cauldron, the Dursley's home exploded in a ball of green flames, Sirius fell almost gracefully through the veil. The screams of the dead were interrupted for Harry when they were joined by the screams of the living. Hogsmeade High street had turned to night as Harry picked himself up and stood on shaky knees.

Dernas was struggling to stand next to him, and Harry shook his head to clear the pain that fed the beasts. He saw in a sort of haze a Dementor lowering its hood to a victim outside Honeydukes, another across the street was doing the same. He saw dozens of the black creatures advancing up the street, crippling innocents as they went. Shrouded in a

cold mist that chilled all to the bone.

With a supreme effort, Harry flicked his wand into his freezing hands from the holster around his wrist. All he felt was cold, not one happy thought surfaced in his mind, all was cold. People fell in shock as the Dementor's presence increased. Seventy five now infested the street, most were on their knees shaking uncontrollably but a few, such as Harry and now Dermas, remained standing.

Happy memory.... Come on. Finding out I'm a wizard! "Expecto Patronum!" Harry croaked, his voice sounding foreign and unwanted against the coldness in the air. A thin sheet of silver mist leaked out of his wand, but disappeared almost instantly. No.... Ron, Hermione. Happy thoughts. Hermione, Ron, friends. Flying for the first time, Quidditch, Dobby, time with Padma.... "Expecto Patronum!"

Again the mist enveloped the air for a moment, but no stag erupted from Harry's wand. The mist was gone soon enough. Harry's eyes rolled into the back of his head as another Dementor appeared barely three feet away, it's long, grey fleshy hand reaching out from under its cloak. He fell to one knee, and Dermas fell with him. The slightly icy ground met his hand as he threw it out to steady himself and another wave of coldness ripped into him. *This is it* he thought. *I'm really going to die....*

Harry dropped his wand and fell back and landed hard on his back. He wrapped his arms around himself for warmth. It was all too much, so much bad had happened that it far outweighed the happy thoughts. He had nothing left, he was just a shell of misery after the horror of his life had finally left its mark. All emotion Harry felt died, all positive emotion that is. All the memories of pain fell into one and a great darkness passed before his eyes. *Voldemort was going to win....*

Harry was no longer sure if he was alive or dead, awake or dreaming. Time lost all meaning as he descended into the haunted depths of his troubled mind. It all seemed to be over, it would have been over if Harry hadn't tried one last time. He was supposed to be the hero, he was supposed to overcome unimaginable odds to save the day. *I am the hero* he thought in the weakest part of his mind, which only just belonged to him and not the cold. *God damn it I am... I'll show them what a hero*

can do! A golden spark had formed in his mind now, and now it was lit no Dementor could distinguish it.

It blossomed, it grew, and it evolved into pure happy emotion. The darkness before Harry's eyes lifted, but what he saw before him nearly brought it back. A Dementor, in all its evil, was barely four inches from his face, its hood lowered, a loud sucking sound coming from the gaping hole on its 'face'. The only defining feature on the rotting head of putrid dead flesh. Harry gasped and with his last ounce of strength and bravery, he lifted his right hand and shoved it hard into the Dementor's face, his palm covering the mouth.

It was the most disgusting thing Harry had ever had to do. His fingers dug into the flesh and they burned with a cold unfelt by anyone ever before. *Jesus... he thought. Now or never. Happy thoughts... Ron... Hermione... Quidditch.... Not good enough... Death... Voldemort... Cedric... NO! Happy... GINNY!*

"EXPECTO PATRONUM!" Harry roared.

This was the first time Harry had ever tried to do the Patronus charm without a wand. The effect was instantaneous. His hand exploded with silver light, shooting right from the palm covering the Dementor's soul sucking mouth. It travelled straight through the Dementor's head and shot out the other side, forming into the amazing silver figure of Prongs, growing as it excelled into the dark, lighting a way.

Harry recovered instantly; he didn't even notice the Dementor before him disintegrating into nothingness. Life returned and the cold was gone. He felt unbelievable warmth seep back into every part of his body, pushing out the cold and replacing the dark memories with joyous ones. Though he couldn't savour it for long, he was the hero, he had work to do. Harry blinked his cold tired eyes and when he opened them again they were alight with a fierce, immortal, determination.

"Prongs," he whispered. "You know what to do...."

The silver stag glittered in the air, blindingly light as he majestically sailed through the darkness. Harry directed the Patronus with his eyes, knocking the vicious creatures of death back into the darkness whence

they came. Prongs grew with each Dementor's disappearance, and soon natural light was returning. It seemed to be coming from Harry, and reached out from him and followed Prongs in his wake. The silver stag crushed seven more creatures and yet more light returned.

After a few more moments it was over, as quickly as it began. Every Dementor had been sent back to the darkness and those able to were beginning to stand. Prongs glowed with deep silver as he trotted on the air back to Harry. When they drew level, Prongs inclined his head to Harry, and Harry bowed slightly. "Thank you," he whispered, before the silver stag faded from existence once more.

Harry turned to see Derms struggling to stand; he offered his hand and lifted the man to his feet. "Thanks..." he croaked. "That was amazing..."

Harry didn't say anything. He picked up his wand and frowned. Looking back up and down the street he heard cries of those lost and those distressed. He saw several soulless bodies on the ground, never to live properly again, but there was something else. Nothing about the attack made sense.

Screams joined the cries and Derms let go of Harry now he had regained enough of his strength. "Nicely done, Harry," he whispered. "You saved everybody. Everybody!" he repeated.

Harry still didn't say anything. He shrugged Derms off and looked up at the sky. Black shapes flew high just below the grey clouds, Harry took them for birds. Turning back to the street he saw people now rushing to get away from the street, and people coming out of the shops, some obviously wondering what had happened. Several wizards across the street were staring at him intently, with awe struck eyes. Harry didn't give them a second glance.

"What's the matter, Harry?" asked Derms. "It's over...."

It was just then that Harry realised his scar was burning. And all the pieces fell into place. Something was very wrong. "Jesus.... It's not over... it's only just begun," Harry whispered quickly, a momentary flash of fear in his eyes. "He's coming...."

Chapter 23 - The Way of the Hero

You have come into a hard world. I know of only one easy place in it, and that is the grave.

~Henry Ward Beecher

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Harry fell to the ground, his scar exploding with a blinding pain that caused him to cry out with an unearthly scream. It was noticed by no one but Dernas, though, as most of the High street was still locked in a state of terror over the current Dementor attack. Screams were common as people shakily got to their feet, those that could anyway. All the while Harry bit his lip against the pain, drawing blood.

"Merlin, Harry," whispered Dernas. "What the hell is happening? We have to get back to Hogwart's now!"

The pain in Harry's scar left as quickly as it had come; he opened his eyes and found himself staring into Dernas'. "Too late..." he croaked,

sounding more regretful than scared. "He's here...."

The screams of the innocent on the street had died down to nothing. A cool, quiet wind blew up and through the street, a few dead leaves flying with it. It seemed as if the whole village, buildings and all, was waiting with baited breath for some unknown moment, in which Evil would enter their presence.

It happened an instant after Harry had stopped talking and picked himself up off the ground. Several loud, unmistakeable pops broke the quietness that had settled on the wizarding village. Dermal grasped Harry's shoulder hard and dragged both of them back into the shadow of a shop, he had finally understood Harry.

More and more pops pierced the air and as a collective group, a scream of absolute terror tore up the street. Barely recovered from the Dementor attack, the dozens of people up and down the street despaired as the evil that plagued their world, showed itself once more. Lord Voldemort, accompanied by at least one hundred and fifty Death Eater's, had Apparated onto the street, his presence known instantly from the wave of terror.

His appearance had effectively created a 'plug' at one end of the street. The exit that led to Hogwarts was now entirely blocked off from the High street. Harry was about one hundred metres away from Voldemort himself, hidden with Dermal in the shadows, but he could still see the Dark Lord, and the seventy or so people that stood in between the two of them. The Death Eater's, Harry wasn't sure how many were there, stood behind their Master, silent in their black robes and masks.

Voldemort and his army did not move, did not make any sound. They stood in absolute silence, seemingly awaiting something. Harry knew what they wanted and also knew it was his duty, whether he wanted it or not, to give it to him. Since the time Harry had been hidden with Dermal to the time Voldemort appeared, only about fifteen seconds had passed. It was then that Voldemort made a graceful sweeping movement with his arm and Harry felt a long, hot, invisible wave of bitter magic pass right across the village of Hogsmeade. He wasn't sure what it was, but something told him it was an anti-Apparation ward.

The masses of innocent's on the street remained fixed in a silent terror. People stood in the middle of the road, hanging out of shops, standing silently in fear. A few witches were slowly trying to make it into the Three Broomsticks, presumably to the Floo fireplace in there. Harry had already begun formulating a plan as he saw this, and now grasped his wand tightly in his right hand, his hand only slightly shaking with the wind.

"Harry," whispered Dernas quickly, dangerously, his hand still grasping Harry's shoulder. "Apparate, Apparate now...."

He shook his head, grimly. "Didn't you feel it? Anti-Apparation wards...."

Dernas swore under his breath and his hand moved to the hilt of his sword strapped to his belt under his robes. "You know why he's here....."

"Of course," Harry smiled, belying the fear he felt. "Prophecy time...."

Harry made to move forward out of the shadows, but Dernas' grip held strong. He saw the people on the street beginning to move now, away from the road. "We have to get out of here!" he said fiercely. It was the most serious he had ever been.

"I can't do that," Harry said just as strongly. "If I leave it will be a massacre. Just like Diagon Alley, just like Abingdon."

"You can't take these chances with you life," Trask whispered, pulling Harry towards the side alley. Harry felt it was time to break free from his grasp.

"If I don't who will?" questioned Harry, knocking Dernas away. "Look, I have a plan...."

Trask paused and looked him up and down. He saw the undying determination in Harry's eyes, the acceptance. He slowly nodded and in an instant all of Dernas' memories of the First Dark War passed before his eyes. He had seen Voldemort only once before, in 1979. It was an experience he was happy to forget, and was lucky to have lived through. Now he was faced with that same Evil, except this time Voldemort didn't look as human as he had done last time. "If you're going out there I'm coming with you."

Harry shook his head. "Not a chance. My battle, my enemy. You have to go get the Aurors. I can hold him back for a while, but I can't take him and the Death Eater's on alone. Get to the Ministry, Trask. Floo from the Three Broomsticks."

Harry's eyes held a light that showed wisdom far beyond his sixteen years. Dernas respected that and saw at that moment why many considered this boy to be the saviour, the hero of the world. He nodded slowly. "Not many would go and face him, Harry. I want you to promise me not to die."

Harry smiled grimly, seeing the weak humour in the joke. "I'm not promising anything," he said, taking a few steps forward.

"What are you going to do?" asked Trask, following Harry.

"Distract him... He'll talk first, play with me. The Death Eater's won't attack, he knows only he can kill me. That's why you have to get the Aurors here, and fast. Whether we like it or not the first major battle between both sides is going to be fought today." They had now stepped out of the shadows and a few people recognised Harry and gasped in surprise.

"Please tell me you know what you're doing...." Dernas said finally.

Harry shrugged, his eyes connecting with Voldemort's. "I know when you are walking through Hell," he said, taking a few steps forward, "to keep on going...."

Harry stepped out into the road, some wizards running across it out of harms way as he did. His new chest armour making him feel slightly braver. After reaching the centre of the road, he turned and stood alone. The road was now deserted, save for a few soulless bodies. The bystanders had now either run away in the opposite direction, jumped into shops or were hiding in various places, unable to Apparate. Not a one had stood against the fear, such as Harry had.

Voldemort's red, pitiless eyes fell on Harry and a smile crept across his snake-like face. The Death Eater's behind him stirred with anticipation. Harry took a few nervous steps forward, closing the gap between the two

of them. Fear and magic were heavy in the air, so much so that Harry could taste it. He was about twenty metres away from the Dark Lord when he came to a stop.

Dermas had taken this opportunity to run across the road, knowing Voldemort wouldn't be interested in him, taking him for nothing more than another frightened victim. As quickly as he could he ran into the Three Broomsticks and growled with anger as he saw the fighting and struggling over the fireplace. *Shit* he thought.

Harry and Voldemort stared deep into each other's eyes. Neither was moving, neither was blinking, neither gave an inch. It was the Dark Lord that broke the silence on the street, taking a few steps across the icy ground, further narrowing the distance between them. His Death Eater's remained in place, filling up the road as far back as the exit to Hogwart's.

"Harry James Potter," spat Voldemort, his voice full of venom. "A fool to leave the protection of your school." His wand was tight in his hand; both he and Harry knew they wouldn't be much good. *Brother Wands....*

Harry smiled shakily, his stomach doing flips. He had never been so nervous. Remembering something Dumbledore had said back at the Ministry in June, Harry spoke. "The Aurors are on their way, Tom."

Voldemort's red eye's blazed with a fury unseen. Several of the Death Eater's from the group stirred angrily, but Voldemort silence them with a wave of his hand. "Yes I had thought I would have to suffer a few words of bravado, Potter. How characteristically *Gryffindor*."

"Thank you," growled Harry, choosing to take it as a compliment to further infuriate Voldemort and to buy time. He didn't like playing with fire, though. He glanced quickly to each side and saw a few witches and wizards sticking their heads out of shops, some looking on fearfully. "Couldn't fight me alone, Tom? What's with the loyal morons?"

Voldemort smiled now and that unnerved Harry. "As you told me, Potter.... The Aurors are on their way."

Harry felt a moment of shock and knew it had spread to his face, he covered it up quickly. Voldemort had planned to start a battle today, he was expecting the Aurors. He was excited at the idea, death would rein. He cringed when realising that people were going to die today.

It was at this moment, as Harry stood alone against the Dark Lord and his army, a cloudy sky threatening a storm overhead, that he realised how far he had come over the past five years. Five years ago he was eleven, living in a cupboard under the stairs. Unloved, barely cared for. It was a sad existence, but it had been a death free one. Now he was facing down the most feared man in known history, no... most feared creature. It threw a lot into perspective, but he didn't have time for that now.

Dermas wrestled his way through the crowd and grabbed a pinch of floo powder from the pot above the fireplace. Pushing a young wizard out of the way, he stepped into the fireplace just as someone disappeared in green flames. Ignoring the anger from all those frightened people, desperate to leave, Trask cast a nervous glance out of the window. He briefly saw Harry walking forward, before throwing the powder down hard. "Ministry of Magic!" he cried.

Dermas didn't stop the instant the floo spat him out in one of the many fireplaces placed in the Atrium of the Ministry. He ran, knocking a few people down as he burst through the crowds of Ministry employees. Dermas knew the Ministry well; he had trained Aurors once upon a time in sword techniques, and knew just where to find their offices. His emotions and adrenalin on high, Trask threw himself in to the elevator just as the doors were closing. In a frantic jump he pushed down hard on the floor for the Auror's.

As the lift ascended, he paused to catch his breath. It was at this moment he realised he wasn't alone in the lift. Three other witches and wizards and a few paper memo's were there with him. The witches and wizards were looking at him strangely, as if he were unhinged. Trask gave them a lopsided smile, panting heavily and then burst forth from the doors of the lift when they opened to the Auror Division.

"HEY!" he cried, turning a corner and then running through a pair of heavy oak doors, emerging in a cluttered open area divided into cubicles. The area was alive with talk and laughter. Trask sprang forward once again; mementoes shooting out of the cubicles. "HEY!" he shouted again.

At this half a dozen of the nearest Aurors stood up quickly, their wands instantly trained on Trask, suspicion heavy in their narrow eyes. These days you never knew what to expect, and being an Auror made you a target to the Dark Lord's servants.

"Bloody hell," cursed Trask, raising his hands, he was no match against the whole Auror division. "Listen," he turned to the nearest Auror. Most of the room had now stood up, and were watching the intruder carefully. "Voldemort," the Auror visibly flinched, "is attacking Hogsmeade."

No one moved, no one spoke. Trask sighed. "Did you hear me?" he shouted to the room at large. "The Dark Lord and his army are in Hogsmeade, right now. I don't think he's there for a drink at the Three Broomsticks."

An Auror was rushing through the crowds of people and cubicles and after a moment came up to Trask. "Dermas!" said Kingsley Shacklebolt, shock and surprise on the Order member's face.

"Shacklebolt," Trask said exasperated. He was one of the Aurors Trask had trained with a sword years ago. "Hogsmeade. Dark Lord. Death Eaters. Am I getting through to you?"

Shacklebolt nodded. "How many?" he asked in his gruff voice.

"I'd say about one hundred and fifty, just bring every Auror you can. Harry needs help! I've already taken too long."

Kingsley's eyes widened. "Harry... Harry Potter?"

Dermas sighed. "Do you know another? He's there facing Voldemort alone."

Kingsley looked fearful for a moment but his years of training quickly hid that. "Right..." he whispered to himself. "Okay." Kingsley was second in command of the division now Arthur was Minister, the men and women

in this room would listen to him. "Sonus," he said pointing his wand at his throat. "AUROR SQUADS THREE THROUGH NINE ASSEMBLE IN THE ATRIUM IN TWO MINUTES. FULL BATTLE WEAR."

Immediately wizards and witches around the room began to move, some running for the lift, others the stairs, some the fireplace. Kingsley continued. "ONE AND TWO, HEALING POTIONS AND PORTKEY'S TO ST. MUNGO'S. TWO MINUTES IN THE ATRIUM."

Trask was impressed, although he didn't have time to show it. Aurors were running all over the place, but they all knew where they were going. It was all organised and within thirty seconds, two thirds of the Auror Division was empty. Shacklebolt wasn't done, though, but Dumas spoke up first. "Anti-Apparition wards are in place, Kingsley," he said quickly, causing the Auror to curse.

"DAMN! OKAY. SPELL AND WARD BREAKERS. FLOO TO THE AUROR OUTPOST ON THE FAR SIDE OF HOGSMEADE. BRING DOWN THOSE ANTI APPARITION WARDS. GO NOW, YOU HAVE FIVE MINUTES." Kingsley had now turned away, heading for the lift. Dumas followed him. "SQUADS TEN TO TWELVE. INFORM THE MINISTER OF THE SITUATION AND THEN INFORM ALBUS DUMBLEDORE AT HOGWARTS. THEN JOIN US AT HOGSMEADE."

Without even waiting for confirmation Kingsley entered the lift, Dumas with him, and the two of them headed back to the Atrium of the Ministry.

When Dumas had come through from the floo place in Hogsmeade, the Atrium had been full of everyday people, bustling and shoving around, going about their business. How it looked now was a far cry from that.

All civilian personnel had been escorted out and in their place, standing in ten rows of fifteen, stood the Aurors, in their white robes with the crest of the Ministry upon their chests. All stood silent in the Atrium, facing the floo fireplaces. Kingsley ran to the front of the rows, every eye in the room following him. In his mind Kingsley was going through all the possibilities of what could occur. He wasn't happy with most of them.

Least of all this mission wasn't sanctioned by the Division leader, the Ministry Heads of Department, or by the Minister himself. Kingsley had

taken it upon himself to lead one hundred and fifty Aurors into battle, without clearance. But that was the least of his worries now. Harry Potter fought alone, and there was no way to get his Aurors to Hogsmeade until those wards came down. Having not taken off the Sonorus spell yet, Kingsley informed the group of the situation.

There was no time for pleasantries; he just got straight into it. "AUROR SQUADS ONE THROUGH TO NINE. YOU HAVE BEEN GATHERED HERE TO ANSWER THE THREAT OF THE DARK LORD AND HIS ARMIES. APPROXIMATELY FIFTEEN MINUTES AGO YOU-KNOW-WHO AND AN ESTIMATED ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTY DEATH EATER'S APPEARED IN THE VILLAGE OF HOGSMEADE. AT THE MOMENT THE VILLAGE IS INACCESSIBLE DUE TO ANTI-APPARITION WARDS." Kingsley paused and caught his breath. "BREAKER DIVISION IS THERE NOW. PREPARE YOURSELVES FOR A FULL SCALE BATTLE. WE LEAVE AS SOON AS THE WARDS ARE DOWN."

That was it, nothing more was said. Kingsley gently tried to Apparate but felt the resistance of the wards. He turned to Dermas to ask him what Harry was doing, and found the man standing with his blade drawn.

After taking the Sonorus spell off himself, Kingsley approached Dermas. "What is Harry trying to do?" he whispered furiously.

Trask smiled grimly. "He's trying to end a war."

"You came looking for a fight, Tom?" asked Harry, his wand pointed straight at the Dark Lord's face. The constant use of Voldemort's long ago name was giving Harry courage, but at the same time infuriating the most evil creature in existence.

"Indeed, Potter," spat Voldemort, his wand equally trained on Harry. "I was told I could find my *equal* here, and here you are. I figure I can destroy you and the Auror's at once."

Harry's eyes twitched. He was so confident, while Harry felt understandably nervous. Still trying to stall for time, Harry took a few

steps to his left. Voldemort and every other pair of eyes in the street followed him. "Then what are you waiting for?" he growled.

Voldemort's face grew with amusement. A smile spread across his white skeleton face. "Very well.... let us duel, Harry Potter."

Harry fell into the duelling stance he felt most comfortable with. Derris had taught it to him. He wondered briefly if the Auror's had been alerted yet. *God I hope* so he thought, but then gave his complete attention back to Voldemort.

"Bow to Death, Harry," whispered Voldemort, Harry heard him and a vicious memory of Cedric flew through his mind. The Dark Lord didn't wait any longer, using the moment Harry was lost in his memories, he struck mercilessly. "*Crucio!*"

Harry didn't even see it coming, he was on the floor as every nerve in his body exploded with pain, blinding and burning. A thousand white hot knives stabbed him repeatedly, again and again. Through the pain he saw the beam of red light that connected him to Voldemort's wand, he saw the manic look on his enemies face, he saw the mass of Death Eater's behind him laughing.

The pain increased and Harry felt his mind slipping away from it. It was at this moment that Harry wondered briefly where the rest of Voldemort's Death Eater's were. Only one hundred and fifty were here, Harry knew for a fact there were *at least* one hundred more.... But that thought was forgotten as a fresh wave of the most excruciating pain imaginable enveloped him, and Harry screamed into the cold air.

The citizens of Hogsmeade watched helplessly from their hiding places as the Dark Lord tortured Harry. Not a one moved as they were all frozen in terror, all unable to tear their eyes from the scene in front of them. He was just a boy, a boy who was feeling the fury of the Dark Lord and no one could help him. Fear was, and would always be, Voldemort's biggest weapon.

Harry gasped for air as his voice grew hoarse from screaming. His scar split and began to bleed but Harry didn't notice it, he had bigger problems. The pain of the Cruciatus was everywhere; he couldn't find

relief from it. It was when he realised this, that he realised Voldemort wouldn't break the connection. He no longer had any reason to. Prophecy had ordained that one of them would die by the other's hand. If Voldemort damaged his mind with the curse, he presented no threat. *Merlin...* Harry thought *I've lost...*

A blinding white light filled his vision, and nothing penetrated it. He was completely blind to the world, and deaf. His very being was still being ripped asunder from the curse, but Harry accepted that now. He knew the end was coming, that it was inevitable.... but something happened then that he didn't expect. Harry felt it only subtly at first, but almost instantly it blossomed into something more. His magic, the pure magic passed down through generations from whatever force had bestowed it upon Godric Gryffindor, was angry. Harry didn't know how to describe this feeling. He just knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that his magic was furious. Maybe it was in response to the unearthly amounts of pain from the Cruciatus, which Harry had now been under for four minutes, though to him it felt like an eternity. Whatever reason he was pissed, and therefore his magic had responded to that emotion, taken on one of its own.

Harry felt it coming a moment before it did. The pure magic broke through the barrier that had stopped it in his mind and seeped into every part of his body. It was the unused, untouched magic that Minra Algren, the pure magic scholar, had told him about a week ago, after he had touched the Seeing Glass. The pain from the Cruciatus stopped instantly, but the connection was still there, he could feel it even though he was blind to everything else. There should be pain, but there wasn't. Not all the magic in him was realised or released at that moment, but an extraordinary amount of it was. It warmed Harry as he felt the invisible substance flowing through him like a river. It made him feel powerful, too powerful for his liking, but it would do for now.

Harry opened his eyes and found himself on the cold ground of Hogsmeade, the dark Lord still standing over him, the red beam of the Cruciatus still connecting him to Voldemort's wand. Harry knew he was supposed to be feeling unbearable pain, but all he felt was a dull ache. No time to ponder it, though, apparently he had rewritten the rules again,

but he wasn't complaining.

Surprisingly Harry still felt his wand in his right hand and it was then, with the power of his magic coursing through him like an untamed river, that Harry Potter fully accepted his place in the world, his purpose for being. He was alive to kill, to end Voldemort's life. He was the champion of the wizarding world, or will be by the time he's done. Prophecy may have decided this, but that no longer mattered to Harry. He had long since grown tired of innocent people suffering and dying at the hand of Voldemort, he knew he would fight now even if there was no prophecy. The world had lived in fear for long enough, too long had Voldemort gone unchallenged by the population, too long had he reached for immortality. Too long had he been a walking plague upon this Earth. So with that in mind, Harry's grip tightened on his wand, and he took the fight back to Voldemort.

Harry rose heroically to his feet, shocking everyone who was watching. Most had assumed that he had long ago fallen under the madness of the Cruciatus, but no. Harry Potter had surprised them all yet again, surviving the curse intact for nine minutes. Shaking his head of weariness, Harry's green eyes met red.

Voldemort broke the connection of the Cruciatus curse and took a quick step back. "Impossible, madness should have claimed you, Potter."

"I am the impossible, Tom," Harry whispered deadly, taking a step forward and brandishing his wand. "Incendio!" he shouted.

Flames tore through the air but Voldemort quickly sidestepped them. His speed was unnatural but Harry didn't have time to think about that as he dodged another Cruciatus curse, his magic tingling with the excitement of battle.

Several Death Eater's behind Voldemort made to move forward, but he stopped them with a wave of his hand. Voldemort and Harry, Dark Lord and Boy, Slytherin and Gryffindor, surveyed each other impenetrably. Their eyes bored into one another, and slowly they circled the ground, wand's heavy in their hands. After a moment, in which all present held their breath, Voldemort spoke.

"You will die," Voldemort said, bringing his wand up to be level with Harry's heart. "You will die painfully."

"Death doesn't frighten me. Death doesn't frighten me at all," Harry said and was surprised that what he had said held some truth. He had been so close to death so many times that he was no longer scared of the prospect. Harry was mindful of the audience of innocent witches and wizards, who had stopped trying to flee and were now watching the exchange between the two enemies. Some had even come out of their hiding places for a better look at this moment, but they did not matter. To Harry all that mattered was the coming duel.

"Dumbledore teach you not to fear death, Boy?" scoffed Voldemort.

Harry smiled grimly. "No, Tom... You did."

Voldemort's eyes blazed with an awesome fury that would have sent anyone else to their knees, but Harry held his ground. "*Vestic!*" hissed Voldemort.

Harry brought his wand up quickly and with a sweeping gesture, created the strongest shield charm he could. Not knowing the spell Voldemort had used, Harry didn't know what to expect. The purple light collided with Harry's shield and both of them exploded in a ball of blue flames, disappearing to nothing. The force knocked Harry back a few steps but he recovered quickly. "*Incendio!*" he cried again, a massive torrent of flame shooting through the air towards the Dark Lord.

Voldemort raised his wand and muttered something Harry didn't catch, but suddenly the flames heading towards him turned to ice, and fell to the ground harmlessly, shattering into a thousand pieces. "*Imperio!*" called Voldemort, using an unforgivable.

Harry threw himself backwards and landed hard on the ground, the curse flying over him, barely brushing his robes. Cobblestones on the street exploded next to him as Voldemort, with his inhuman speed, rained down dark curses one after the other. He dodged, rolling right and coming up in a defensive crouch. But Voldemort held the offensive now, and it was all Harry could do to avoid his barrage of deadly curses.

"*Protego!*" Harry said quickly, using the brief protection to get to his feet. "*Vestit*," he said, repeating the curse from only a few minutes ago. The purple light shot from his wand and Harry knew that it was dark magic. But he didn't care.

The curse missed, of course, as Voldemort's shield absorbed it. Harry swore under his breath as Voldemort laughed evilly. "*Avada Kedavra!*"

Harry ran to the right as fast as he could to avoid the wall of green light, the wall of death. It collided with the ground behind him and the cobblestones were once again thrown into the air, destroyed into dust. The impact was deafening and it threw Harry to the ground, but thankfully the curse missed him. The innocent people on the street gasped in shock and terror at this, but many sighed with relief as Harry got back up.

"*Crucio,*" cried Voldemort and Harry fell to one knee under the curse. This time the pain was there but it wasn't as bad. He managed to remain standing on one knee. It had begun to rain now and Harry wiped the water off his glasses, before standing again still under the Cruciatus.

Raising his wand, Harry cried. "*Soroxim!*"

Voldemort's Cruciatus instantly broke and Harry stood up with a new strength. He ran back towards Voldemort, his wand glowing at the tip as he did. "*Gostagicus!*"

Long, slimy, green vines grew out of Voldemort's wand and he brandished them like a whip. A crack rang through the air as he flicked his wand and the three vines, which were razor sharp, tore across Harry's chest as he ran. Harry stopped running, and some of the Death Eater's cheered. He didn't know why.

Voldemort was sure he had just won. Those vines he had used as whips, could cut through steel, and would have torn right through Potter. Harry looked down at his chest, and saw the cloth of his robe fall away, completely ripped to shreds. This made his entire robe fall away, revealing his black jeans and shirt, exposing his bare arms. Voldemort saw this and howled with anger as he saw through the cut's also on Harry's shirt. He was wearing-

I am glad I bought that armour Harry thought to himself. "Vestit!" he shouted, recovering quickly.

Voldemort stepped forward and raised his wand, still attached to the vines and sent them crackling through the air. The thorny vines connected with the dark spell and both spells exploded, sending showers of sparks everywhere.

The duel became a blur to Harry. He wasn't sure how much time had passed as spells and curses melded into one another. Fire and destruction rained down on the street from where the two enemies duelled. The innocent watched with wide, hopeful eyes on one side, while the Death Eater's watched from the other side. And there was still no sign of the Aurors.

Harry deflected a fireball charm, but unfortunately that sent it into the front window of Honeydukes. The duel was moving so fast Harry didn't even notice as the wooden building exploded, splinters of wood and glass flying up into the air and raining down upon the town. It was also raining sweets.

For Harry, curses were exchanged back and forth so fast they were barely uttered before another took its place. His magic had grown so much it was frightening. So far none of the spells used had caused the brother wand affect, for which Harry was thankful, but he didn't want to push his luck. Minutes passed but it felt like hours. The street had become a mess of cobblestones and debris in those few minutes and Harry began to feel the strain, even though his magic had grown so much. *Where the hell were the Aurors....?*

Kingsley paced the Atrium with Dermal restlessly. Twelve minutes had passed since he had sent the ward breakers to Hogsmeade and so far no luck. In his stomach was the gnawing feeling that Voldemort could have killed Harry a hundred times over in the time they were taking to get there.

Dermal swore angrily and tried once again to Apparate. Nothing, the wards were in place, they were too strong. He had left Harry to die.

The one hundred and fifty Aurors still stood to attention, nerves clearing showing on some of their faces. Tonks stood in the group on the far left, and she was desperate for something to happen. Her hair was a bright blue with anticipation, and she chewed her fingernails nervously. *Come on....* she thought.

"That's it," said Trask. "I'm flooing back. Follow me if you can, just get there quickly."

"Wait," said Kingsley, but it was too late. Trask stepped into one of the many fireplaces and picked up a pinch of floo. "The Three Broomsticks," he said. Flames roared up but Trask did not disappear, the flames died down. "SHIT!"

"It's being used from the other end," said Shackbolt. "It's the wards or nothing...."

Harry was panting heavily, blood dripped down his face from his scar. Several other cuts on his arms, and one on his neck, were also bleeding but thankfully nothing was too serious. He and Voldemort had ceased the spell work, and were now circling a patch of the torn up ground, their eyes darting to and fro.

"You have grown, Harry," Voldemort said, his eyes flashing dangerously.

"In hopes of killing you one day," Harry replied calmly. He cast a quick glance around the street and what he saw shocked him. Honeydukes was in flaming ruins; the cobblestones of the road and path were destroyed and upturned in many places. Several benches and rubbish bins were alight, and many lampposts were bent out of shape. Harry was even more shocked when he realised that some of the spells he had cast had caused some of the damage.

"*Pelius sox trux*," whispered Voldemort, and the bench to his left shimmered and transfigured into a large green snake with pitiless red eyes, much similar to its master's.

"*Attack*," hissed Voldemort in parseltongue, only Harry understood him.

The long snake slithered forward, hissing menacingly. Harry took a few steps back but the snake was incredibly fast, it struck out at him faster than his eyes could see and sunk its fangs deep into Harry's upper right arm, causing him to drop his wand. Harry cried out with pain and brought his left arm around. "*Incendio*," he growled, wincing. The snake exploded in a ball of red flames.

Harry rolled into a dive, picking up his wand with his left hand as he did. As he came back up, he pulled one of the snake's fangs out of his arm, hardly noticing the pain. Voldemort hadn't been idle, though. He had seen the wandless magic Potter had just performed and decided to end this now.

He once again brandished his wand like a whip, and just as Harry was raising his own wand, Voldemort brought it down fast and hard. Immediately Harry felt a constricting weight across his entire body. Invisible, hard ropes held him in place and pinned his arms to his sides, effectively leaving him at Voldemort's mercy. "Oh damn...." he breathed, turning to look up into Voldemort's face.

Voldemort smiled and without another moment's hesitation fired the most Unforgivable curse. "*Avada Kedavra!*"

Harry saw the green light of death coming his way, saw the inevitability of the future. It was going to hit and he was powerless to stop it. A thousand unfinished images of his life passed before his eyes, so many hard times all become a jumble as his vision was completely enveloped by the green light. It was a mere inch away from his face, the cold curse of death, he could smell it, hear it, and feel its untamed power. But there was also another wave of power that was completely unrelated to the killing curse and Harry's eyes widened when he felt it. And then he Apparated.

POP!

Harry reappeared instantly one metre to his left, and the curse shot passed him at an amazing speed, the force knocking him to the floor. It collided with one of the many thatched cottages in the village, disintegrating the wood of its front and causing the building to go up in green flames. Harry smiled in spite of himself, he was alive and the

invisible ropes binding him were gone. But that wasn't all....

One hundred and fifty loud pops radiated up and down the High Street of Hogsmeade and one hundred and fifty Aurors came with it. Harry laughed out loud as he saw them, not willing to believe that he'd held off Voldemort long enough to protect the people of the village and get the Aurors here.

It was the ultimate standoff. Harry thought that as he rose to his feet, weary from his duel with Voldemort. One hundred and fifty Aurors were at one end of the street, one hundred and fifty Death Eaters at the other and in the middle stood one Dark Lord and one teenage boy.

Albus Dumbledore paced his study calmly, watching the rain fall lightly against his window. Beyond the window the forest swayed in the wind and the village of Hogsmeade couldn't be seen for the clouds and sheets of rain.

As he did most of the time, Dumbledore was thinking of Harry. More accurately of Harry's fate. It was a cruel twist of fate that had led him to the defeat of Grindelwald all those years ago, he had never quite recovered. But the hand Fate had dealt Harry was a thousand times worse. One trial after the other and the boy somehow pulled through miraculously, stronger than before. He wondered briefly if Harry would one day take too much and finally crack under the immense weight constantly placed on his shoulders.

Albus looked up as Fawkes shrilled twice from his golden perch. One hundred years spent with the amazing creature and Dumbledore had come to understand his calls. Someone was coming through the floo. He turned towards the fireplace and folded his hands neatly in front of himself.

Sure enough a moment later the fire roared to life in a torrent of green flames and sparks. With the flames came the twirling form of a person and after they stopped spinning Dumbledore's brow creased.

"Headmaster," said the man quickly, bowing slightly to Albus.

"Hello, Rollins," smiled Dumbledore, remembering his old student, who, just like most, would always call him Headmaster. Rollins had left Hogwarts eight years ago, he had become an Auror. "What can I do for you?"

Harry looked between the three separate groups of people on the street. To his right stood the Death Eater's, wands now out pointed at the group to his left, the Aurors. Harry saw Dermas at the front of this group with Kingsley Shacklebolt. They were all looking around unbelievably at the destruction on the street and then between Harry and Voldemort themselves. The third and final group was that of the innocent bystanders, who now had enough sense to try and get out of the way. This was not going to be pretty.

Turning back to his enemy, Harry saw Voldemort looking right at him and then he smiled, causing his skeleton like face to look even more manic. This was what he wanted. A slaughter... and from the looks of things he was going to get it.

Breathing heavily, Harry watched as the most senior Auror present stepped forward, hesitating for only a moment. It was Kingsley.

"Lord V-Voldemort," shouted Kingsley, and Harry winced when he stumbled on saying the name. Voldemort didn't even turn to face him, everything was deathly quiet as the Dark Lord continued to stare straight at Harry. "I, as a representative of the Ministry of Magic and of wizarding Britain, do hereby order you to cease any and all hostile activity and to surrender your wand and order your servants to do the same."

Harry might have laughed if the situation hadn't been so serious. He heard some of the Death Eater's mumble curses under their breath. Voldemort didn't even blink.

"And if I refuse, Auror?" questioned Voldemort, his eyes and wand still trained on Harry.

Kingsley paused for a moment but then found his voice. "We will be forced to use any means at our disposal to resolve this," he looked

around at the flaming street, "conflict...."

"Very well," nodded Voldemort and as if that was the queue the Death Eater's had been waiting for, the biggest battle fought in wizarding Britain in the past seventeen years began.

Harry threw himself to the ground a moment before it happened. Hundreds of curses were shouted instantly as Aurors and Death Eater's alike raised their wands to fight. Harry was pinned to the ground, unable to move as the magical force of three hundred separate curses was astonishing. Greens, reds, blues, purples, whites, oranges, yellows, and brown curses flew through the air in a magnificent rainbow of deadly colours.

It was at once the most amazing and sickening thing Harry had ever seen. The curses met in the middle as the forces of light and darkness moved about the street, some firing a second curse to join their first. The effect was instantaneous and the heat burned the skin off Harry's cheek. The inevitable happened and as the curses collided in the middle, they were deflected in every direction imaginable.

To Harry it sounded like the end of the world. Hundreds of curses colliding in mid air, most were deflected straight up into the sky, before turning around and beginning to rain back down on the five hundred or so people, Aurors, Death Eater's, and civilians, none were spared. The curses came back down in a rain of magical missiles, mixing with the magic of others they became mostly destructive curses. Spells hit buildings, tore up the cobblestone road, destroyed bins and benches, burnt trees to the ground, and killed dozens.

Getting over his initial shock at the wild rain of curses, Harry only just managed to raise a shield charm to protect him against the worst of the fall. Screams rang out from those unable to defend themselves, Aurors and Death Eater's fell dead.

Harry breathed in heavily, coughing on the heavy smoke and dust in the air. With an effort he stood up and beheld the battle around him.

The two forces, light and dark, good and evil, charged at each other mercilessly, stepping over the fallen bodies of their friends, allies. Harry

was, quite simply, washed away in the tide. He was stuck between a rock and a hard place, holding onto his wand for dear life.

With the barrage of curses and the constant movement of the battle, Harry had lost sight of Voldemort. With a wrench he pulled himself free of a crowd of Aurors and Death Eater's, stunning one as he did, and ran out onto the road. There was a little more room to breathe out here but Harry still had to dodge curses as they flew back and forth.

He looked around quickly, searching for the Dark Lord... but there was too much destruction and fighting going on. Voldemort could be anywhere on the street by now, killing Auror's.

"Reducto," he cried, turning around and blasting a Death Eater through the air. *Voldemort... where the hell are you?*

Smoke and ash were heavy in the air and Harry coughed slightly, running up into the heart of the street towards the Three Broomsticks. He had to fight his way there, but this was a whole new battle. No one paid any particular attention to him, he was just another face in the crowd. Surprisingly, that made it easier to get where he was going. He stunned another Death Eater as he went, panting heavily at the exhaustion of the fight.

Screams and cries echoed down the street and through Harry's mind. Fighters on both sides fell, littering the ground with their bodies. Harry shook his head to block out the death and again looked around for Voldemort. He was nowhere to be found, Harry couldn't see him anywhere on the street. *Coward* he thought, protecting himself against a curse with a new shield charm.

Destruction was absolute on the High street now. Shops and cottages exploded in balls of flame, all different colours. The road and cobblestone pavement was ripped and blasted apart; the Three Broomsticks was still undamaged, though. With a frustrated sigh, Harry turned around once again to look for Voldemort and had just broken into a run when a blasting curse exploded before him. He was thrown back hard through the air and landed with a crack on the road ten yards away.

Harry sucked in a sharp breath and grasped his wand tightly. He gently

pushed his chest and then cringed. *Broken ribs*. How many he wasn't sure, but they hurt like hell. The force of the fall, even with the armour, had broken them on impact. With a heavy cough Harry rolled over and tried to get to his feet but needed another moment to catch his breath.

"Reparo," he said from the ground, repairing the cracks in his glasses. It was then that he felt two pairs of hands grasp him tightly under each of his arms and begin to drag him away. At first Harry was surprised and pained, he winced as his arms were moved and disturbed the snapped ribs. His second instinct was that of danger, looking up he saw two familiar faces and all sense of danger left for now.

Dermas and Tonks dragged Harry towards one of the alcoves underneath a partially destroyed Zonko's joke shop. Tonks had one arm under his and was firing curses into the fray with the other. Dermas was doing the same. Harry was able to watch the battle momentarily as the pair dragged him to safety. The two forces had melded together into one. White robes mixed with black robes, cries and grunts were heard as curses killed or maimed. At least half of the Death Eaters still remained and maybe the same for the Aurors. It was then that Harry caught sight of Voldemort, standing alone at the far end of the street, where his Death Eaters had stood originally. He was at the Hogwart's entrance to Hogsmeade, standing unchallenged as he surveyed the battle before him.

As Harry watched, he saw Voldemort look up to the cloudy sky and Harry's own eyes followed him. What he saw made him swear loudly, though it was drowned out by the noise of battle. What Harry had originally took for birds, flying high in the clouds, were actually revealed to be something quite different now they flew lower. Twenty Death Eater's were seated on brooms, Firebolt's from the looks of them, and had just begun to rain down curses on the unsuspecting Aurors below. This would quickly turn into a one sided battle.

Tonks and Dermas dragged Harry under the shadow of the shops window and dropped him a little roughly. He coughed and winced as his ribs twinged with pain. Tonks leaned down next to him and quickly erected a complex shield charm. Dermas blasted a Death Eater away.

"HARRY!" cried Tonks. "STAY HERE BEHIND THE SHIELD."

Her voice was the most serious Harry had ever heard it, but he still shook his head and made an attempt to stand up. Tonks pushed him back down, her now green hair shimmering red angrily. Harry saw Dermas unsheathe his sword and push it through a nearing Death Eater. Harry shook his head, knowing that it was either him or them. He made another move to get up.

"HARRY! STAY DOWN FOR CHRIST SAKE," yelled Tonks, pushing him down again.

"NO!" Harry replied, his eyes blazing angrily. "I'VE GOT TO GO FIGHT HIM."

Tonks blinked and shook her head, though a little uncertainly. The dustbins to her left exploded in flames and rubbish was flung asunder. Harry raised his wand and shot an *Incendio* charm over Tonks' shoulder, she ducked slightly and Harry's spell connected with an advancing Death Eater, ending his life.

Harry gritted his teeth and rose shakily to his knees. Tonks again made a move to stop him but Harry pushed her back. "HARRY..." she said warningly. "LET US AUROR'S HANDLE IT."

Harry saw that Dermas had rejoined the battle, running down the street with a sword in one hand and a wand in the other. He looked quite powerful. Harry turned back to Tonks. "HANDLE IT?" he scoffed. The battle had turned in favour of the Death Eater's as those on brooms were killing Aurors untouched. They were slowly being pushed back towards the Three Broomsticks. Voldemort still stood alone unchallenged at the roads end. "GET OUT OF MY WAY, TONKS," he said angrily, standing quickly and ignoring the pain in his ribs.

The pure magic in him responded at his emotion of anger. It was already on high from all the battle and from whatever the hell had happened during that Cruciatus curse god knows how long ago. Tonks tried to get near him, to push him back down, but found that she couldn't. There was an invisible barrier around him, stopping her from touching him.

Harry just looked at her, hoped she would be alright, and took a few steps forward out into the road. He heard her calling behind him but he paid it no heed. Looking up into the air, he saw the twenty or so Death Eater's on brooms, the leverage in this battle, flying quickly and dangerously over the fight, shooting curses every now and again. He ducked as one flew almost right into his head.

Harry stood behind a group of Aurors that were holding the line on the street, keeping the advancing Death Eater's at bay, but it was fast becoming hopeless. The forces of darkness held the advantage in this battle, they held the air. *Something I'm going to change* thought Harry. Amidst the shouts of curses, the screams of pain, and the explosion of buildings, Harry raised his wand at the nearest flying Death Eater.

With a grim smile on his face and a resignation at what he had to do. Harry pointed his wand and shouted. "*Accio Broom!*"

He had done it earlier in the year, in his death defying flight to Hogwarts. It had worked then and it worked now. The broom slid out from underneath the Death Eater, as he only had one hand on it, and shot through the air towards Harry. The previous owner of the broom plummeted to the ground. He wasn't that high so Harry assumed he had lived.

Harry caught the broom with a twirl in his left hand, pocketing his wand deep in his jeans pocket as he did. A weak fireball spell hit him in the back as he began to mount the broom but thankfully the dragon armour pulled through for him again. As he had thought, the broom was a Firebolt. He felt it respond immediately under his touch as he kicked off from the ground hard.

As he ascended, Harry briefly thought about the Quidditch practice he was supposed to be attending later on tonight. *Probably cancelled* he thought with a sigh, wiping his glasses clean of rain and dirt. Harry soared up above the town and was soon higher than any other. Looking down at the battle he sighed again. Aurors and Death Eater's alike littered the once snow white street of Hogsmeade. It was now stained red with the blood of fallen fighters and innocent bystanders. Harry could see people running all over the village, most away from the High Street

as fast as they could. Looking into the distance, he could just barely make out the shape of Hogwart's through the rain.

Harry turned his attention back to the battle and the flying Death Eater's that were pushing the Aurors back into a corner. He pushed the broom down hard and accelerated to sixty in a few seconds. He saw his first flying victim directly beneath him and in a few seconds Harry shot passed him, pulling out of the dive just before he hit the ground and a group of Aurors, soaring back into the air. The Death Eater he'd skimmed fell to the ground, his broom quickly summoned from under him as Harry had flown passed.

Dermas battled against two Death Eater's outside the Hogsmeade branch of Weasley's Wizard Wheezes. The building was alight in several places, but inside it was deserted. The staff had used the floo to escape. Raising his sword Dermas deflected a bone breaking curse and sent one back of his own. His sword was wrought of magic so it remained undamaged from the curse. His first enemy fell with a broken neck, the other when he was pierced on the end of the sword.

Pulling his blade clean of the Death Eater, Dermas looked up in time to see Harry fly passed overhead, knocking an unsuspecting Death Eater from their broom. Dermas cheered and smiled. *God that kid doesn't know when to quit* he thought, returning to the battle.

The numbers of Death Eater's and Aurors had thinned dramatically now, both sides fighting with only a few dozen members. The Death Eater's still held the advantage with the air, though, but Harry was taking care of that.

Harry swooped and swerved, using his natural born flying skills to dodge curses and send some of his own back. He dislodged seven Death Eater's from their Firebolt's. One after another they fell and Harry remained unscathed. But as number eight plummeted to earth, the other flyers began to realise what was going on and all of them concentrated their attacks on Harry.

Twelve Death Eater's chased Harry through the air, following his every move, shooting curses from behind their masks. He soared across several streets and back, through the thick black smoke rising from the

flames of ruined cottages, but nothing could shake them. A blasting curse connected with the twigs of the broom, destroying a few of them, but the Firebolt could take it. The damage wasn't too bad and Harry shot a curse of his own back into the group of twelve following him. His connected and the power in it sent three Death Eater's from their brooms. From the height they were flying at they wouldn't survive.

Another curse, dark blue, grazed his ear and Harry instantly felt woozy. He fell a few metres and only just corrected himself, coming to his senses before flying into a building. With his heart beating fast and exhaustion threatening to claim him, Harry turned upwards sharply and managed to shake a few of his attackers, but not all.

Right he thought. *Let's try something....* Harry thought back a month ago to the nightmare that was Abingdon, the massacre that was Abingdon. He had used a technique there in which the magic of a curse was left at the top of his wand and then joined by another and another, creating a more powerful version of the spell. His eyes fell on the group of advancing Death Eater's down on the street, about thirty five strong and driving the Aurors back. They were clustered in a big group. *Perfect....* Harry thought grimly. It was the perfect opportunity, but many could die. Deciding the pros far outweighed the cons, Harry pushed his broom hard further up into the sky, leaving his attackers behind as he flew higher and higher.

At the speed at which a Firebolt could fly, it didn't take long for him to reach the low hanging clouds; Harry disappeared into one of them, immediately soaked in the rain and moisture of the storm cloud. It was freezing in there, but it was also the perfect cover. He hovered just inside the cloud, drenched from head to toe and shaking slightly in the cold.

With his wand in his hand Harry concentrated on the spell he would use. The Reductor Curse, the blasting curse. Harry thought the magic, willed it to the end of his wand. It happened just like he hoped it would. The tip began to glow red with the power of the spell. Harry took a deep breath, concentrated and then added another. Two minutes passed and in that time Harry added twenty two blasting spells to the end of his wand. The power was enormous, the light from the tip blinding. The heat coming off the spells was enough to negate the cold of the clouds and air. His wand

shook violently under his grasp from the amount of raw power coursing through it.

Harry knew this *super* spell had the power to take out the group of advancing Death Eater's, he knew it would probably kill some of them, knew it would be an enormous drain on his power. He knew all of this and he accepted it. It was his job to fight, he'd promised himself that many times. If someone was foolish enough to become a Death Eater then they would be shown no mercy over the lives of the Aurors. With that in mind, Harry pointed his broom towards the ground, thousands of feet below, and held his shaking wand tightly. He could feel the electricity of the storm in the clouds around him, the moisture building. It was about to break.

Harry closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and then dropped to the ground. He flew out of the cloud fast, gained speed even faster, and dropped towards Hogsmeade at a speed never before reached on a broom. The wind from the fall was so much that it blew the moisture from his soaked clothes and dried his drenched hair. The storm broke behind him, and lightning flashed and forked across the sky. Thunder roared as Harry opened his eyes, one hand held tightly to the broom, the other to his glowing shaking wand. The village approached fast and Harry saw the lights of the duelling curses below. As he dropped even further he made out the shapes of his target.

Thirty five Death Eater's carried on up the street mercilessly, as the Aurors desperately tried to portkey the injured away while still attacking. They weren't doing well. This hardened Harry's resolve and with a final nod to himself, he got ready to release his curse.

Lightning, rain, and thunder all mixed into one behind him as he cut a path down through the falling rain. The village was coming up fast now and Harry was travelling at an awesome speed. The bubbling power at the end of his wand was desperate for release, the wood was so hot under his hand. The sound of the battle reached his ears first and with a fierce determination in his eyes, Harry released the power of his blasting curse.

"REDUCTO!" he bellowed, pointing his wand forward, directly into the

heart of the group of Death Eater's.

The effect was instant, vicious, and powerful. It simply detonated. The red curse exploded out of the end of Harry's wand, untamed power spilled out in the form of crimson light. It exploded from the tip; his wand went with it, splintering into a thousand fragments. Most of them cutting into his hand, tearing it to shreds. Harry didn't have time to think about that, though. The shockwave from the curse, as the beam of red light plummeted to the ground, sent Harry spiralling backwards on the broom and it took his all to hang on to it as he rocketed back up into the sky. With the world spinning crazily on the broom for Harry, he didn't see the curse's impact, but he sure as hell heard it.

BOOM!

The thick, unbreakable beam of red curse light came down into the centre of the group of Death Eater's. It enveloped one of them instantly, his form simply disintegrating. When it hit the ground, the beam kept falling and seemingly disappeared into the earth, the destroyed cobblestones showing no sign of it. Everything was quiet, not a soul on the street moved. Voldemort remained standing in his spot, his eyes jumping to the spinning form of Harry on his broomstick high up in the sky to the group of Death Eater's in the vicinity of where the curse had disappeared.

All the Aurors up the street had seen the impressive beam fall into the group of Death Eater's, and all of them had expected a bit more than what had happened. The Death Eater's themselves seemed to shrug it away, and most had once again trained their wands on the Aurors. There was one on the street, though, who knew what was coming.

Voldemort felt the power before he heard or saw it and the surprise on his face was at once truly frightening and then down right terrifying. "APPARATE YOU FOOLS," he shouted to his remaining Death Eater's. "IT'S-"

The curse exploded just beneath the ground. The force and absolute power behind the spell caused the most devastating destruction to the street yet. The ground in a twelve metre radius simply disappeared into nothingness as the heat burned through, the red light cracking it in parts.

The explosion came next. It was the boom Harry heard and that everyone else felt.

The thirty four Death Eater's were thrown high into the air, most were in several pieces as the red light consumed them. Dust, debris, rock, and body parts were sent flying in a massive fireball of destruction that levelled three deserted buildings and set fire to others. All the bodies in the area of the already dead were thrown as well, so were those who were injured. The remaining flying Death Eater's were knocked away, some hitting shops, others falling into flame.

The remaining twenty or so Aurors up the street, including Tonks, Dermas, and Kingsley, were knocked of their feet from the raw power of the blasting spell. Smoke rose from the impact crater, shooting two hundred feet into the air. It was the effect Harry had hoped for and dreaded. He had just effectively ended the battle and no Aurors were hurt in the blast, but Death Eater's were and no matter what Harry told himself now, he felt guilty over their deaths.

After he stopped spinning Harry gained control of the broom and looked down on the destruction below. He saw the massive dust cloud and quickly began flying down, weariness beyond belief welling up inside him from the drain on his power. The ground came up faster than he had expected and Harry sharply pulled out of his dive a little too late. The tail of the broom clipped the ground and threw Harry off, his back scraping across the ground as he made contact with the destroyed cobblestone. Thankfully his back armour protected his skin. Harry's slide came to a stop as he hit the body of someone fallen, he didn't know who.

For a moment Harry blinked in and out of consciousness, the world fading black before his eyes. He turned his head and saw the countless number of dead on the street, their blood mixing with one another. In a deep corner of his mind Harry thought that's what this is all about. *Blood*. Pureblood, Half-blood, Mudblood. *Hell it doesn't matter now* he cried as the blood continued to mix. *It's all the same once spilt...*

Harry's eyes flicked over the crater in the ground, from where his blasting curse had connected, he closed his eyes and wiped away a tear at the sight of the dead. He had to be strong, had to be.... strong. *Why?*

The world seemed to slow for Harry and he had a thousand different thoughts and emotions pass through him in one instant. *Why does this happen....? Why do we have to fight... why is our world based on the morals of good and evil. What's the deal? WHY! What purpose does this serve? The Death.... destruction, the fight for power! ANSWER ME!* Harry cried to his mind.

No answer came.

Since the moment the Aurors had arrived on the street, only fifteen minutes had passed. One quarter of an hour. In that time one hundred and forty lay dead on the street, one hundred or so others lay dying. To Harry it had felt like days, as he slowly struggled to his feet. The Dementors, the duel with Voldemort and the first real battle of the war between Aurors and Death Eater's, had all taken their toll. Harry swayed unsteadily on his feet as the smoke from the destruction cleared. He looked up the street and saw the remaining Aurors running around, searching for the wounded, putting out fires on buildings, evacuating the survivors. No one noticed the Boy Who Lived. Harry looked left down the street and his heart skipped a few beats. Voldemort still stood alone by the edge of the road, his eyes locked on Harry. Even though they were a fair distance apart, Harry could feel more than see the fury that the Dark Lord held.

Harry just glared right on back and took a few steps forward, towards him, shakily. He limped on his ankle; it may have been sprained, fractured even. His hand bled heavily from the splinters of his now destroyed wand embedded in his flesh, his broken ribs made every breath painful.

Everything seemed so surreal to Harry. The bodies, the fires, the massive crater he had created. There was a loud ringing in his ears that further took away the aspect of realism; nothing was real... but the pain. He shivered in the cold and shock, unwilling to believe it. In his head he cried to anyone who was listening to help him but the closest friend was far and away up the street. Voldemort was closer.

Harry gritted his teeth and limped on towards his enemy, wincing every other step. He stepped over bodies, debris, and moved around his crater

that was almost the width of the street and about seven metres deep. Voldemort didn't move as Harry approached, didn't do anything except keep his eyes locked with Potter's. Harry moved with a purpose, with one thought in his mind, one last duel.

The ground sped up beneath him and quicker than he'd thought, Voldemort loomed up before him. Harry breathed in heavily, ignoring the pain, the physical pain that is. In his mind he was screaming for death to take the creature before him, to end the suffering. So many ruined lives all brought back to this skeleton of a man and the power and fear he could wield.

The storm Harry had been up in only moments ago, raged overhead. Rain splattered the ground and lightning forked across the sky. A small gust of wind blew down the street, billowing the robes of the Dark Lord and ruffling the hair of the Hero.

Silence was absolute as the wind blew the smoke around in dust clouds that dissipated in the rain. The only sound reaching Harry was that of the small tip tap as the rain hit his dragon armour and that was drowned out as Voldemort spoke.

"How does it feel, Harry?" he hissed. There was no wand in the Dark Lord's hands, he was unarmed.

"How does what feel?" Harry replied, clenching his fists, ignoring the pain from the splinters.

Voldemort smiled. "To have the power of a god at your fingertips, to take life without regard, to fight and kill... How does it feel?"

Harry swayed on the spot, guilt weighing down upon him. Though he wasn't going to let his enemy see that. "I did what I had to do...."

"As do we all, Harry. The end justifies the means..." Voldemort's voice was laced with bitterness.

"I SAVED THE LIVES OF THE AURORS!" shouted Harry, his palm tingling with magic. Anger and hatred threatened to consume him.

Voldemort laughed menacingly. "And yet you still feel you have to justify

yourself, to me of all people. *Murderer....* We truly are equals."

"Shut up," whispered Harry weakly. "I'm nothing like you...."

"You don't sound to sure, Potter. Death can be-

Half a dozen loud pops echoed down the street near Harry and he turned sharply, palm raised in defence. *Not more Death Eater's* he thought. It wasn't. Harry sighed with relief and he heard Voldemort hiss in anger.

Albus Dumbledore, accompanied by half the teaching staff at Hogwart's had Apparated onto the street, barely a stones throw from Harry. With him were McGonagall, Flitwick, Sinistra, Mad Eye Moody, and another man Harry didn't know. Judging from the robes he was wearing he was an Auror.

"Harry..." called Dumbledore worriedly, his eyes searching the destruction of the street and all the dead that littered it, his mind jumping to conclusions that all spelled death for Harry. His fears lessened a moment later, though, when he saw Harry standing shakily. He was alone with Voldemort, but he was alive.

McGonagall gasped at the street around her and nearly fainted when she saw the endless rows of bodies and the smouldering ruins of the buildings. After a moment she too found Harry. All of the other staff did as well and nobody moved. Harry smiled slightly and turned back to Voldemort and a great fear instantly grasped him. The Dark Lord now had his wand pointed straight at him, an evil grin still on his face.

"Death can be painful, Harry. As I've said before I wouldn't know, I have not died. The end is coming and Death haunts both our footsteps. I *will* kill you... and all that you love. Know that you will find no rest in this world and that no one can protect you." Voldemort's eyes flicked over to Dumbledore and the others, who had their wands out and were watching the exchange nervously. "Until next time, Harry...."

Voldemort disappeared with a pop, and a great weight seemed to be lifted from the street and a long held breath was let out. Just like that it was over. Hundreds were dead but the war was no closer to ending.

Harry fell to his knees at the hopelessness of it all. *What was the point...? Why do I do it... where am I going... where is it going to take me...? If this is life then why is death made out to be so bad...? Please answer me....*

No answer came.

"Harry...." said Dumbledore slowly, having walked over. He placed one of his wizened hands on Harry's shoulder. "What happened?"

Harry laughed mirthlessly, crying slightly at the end. "I killed them."

Dumbledore's grip on his shoulder tightened. He and Harry barely heard the shouts from the remaining people on the street. Harry was kneeling in rubble, his cheeks moist with tears. "You did so in self defence, Harry. To protect others..."

Harry sighed and looked up absently at the storm raging overhead, the raindrops falling onto his glasses. Right now he felt incredibly alone. "Yeah..."

Murderer... We truly are equals....

No.... Harry told himself. No.... Unconsciousness claimed him.

Chapter 24 - Growing Power

All things are ready, if our minds be so.

-- William Shakespeare, Henry V

Murderer... We truly are equals....

A fortress of stone stood tall on the island, surrounded by sea. It was the home of the damned, of the guilty... and occasionally the innocent. Abandoned by the creatures of darkness, Azkaban fortress was a decidedly cheerier place nowadays. Guarded by twenty five Aurors it

was still the main wizarding prison of Britain.

It was home to many enemies of the light. Thirty seven Death Eaters lived in its dark, dank halls. Users of the Unforgivables resided there. Dark Wizards outnumbered the Aurors three to one in this hell on earth. The worst of the worst festered in its infinitely dirty cells, prisoners full of malice spent their waking hours plotting revenge, because many had heard their master's call. Their arms were burning.

It would not take much to break the island prison open.

Harry opened his eyes to the early morning darkness and for one blissful moment remembered nothing. An instant later all of it came crashing down in an unbreakable font of memories. The Dementor attack, His arrival, the duel, the curse, the explosion of his wand, the final fall. Harry closed his eyes again and sighed into his hand, which was bandaged from the wound he had suffered.

Guilt as heavy as a mountain weighed down upon him, it was the weight of the dead. It was suffocating him. A hundred images of all those that had died passed before his eyes, cut down mercilessly, for nothing. And with that came the cold, stark realisation that no matter how he fought this war... death would follow him everywhere. The war hadn't ended in Hogsmeade, it had only just begun.

Harry held back the tears that were desperate for release and pulled the sheets of the hospital bed off of him. With a cry he stood up and made for the door as fast as he could. He didn't notice the lone figure that was sitting in the shadows on the other side of his bed. The figure that hadn't slept that night, just in case he woke up.

It's never fair.... God! I want someone... I want Sirius... He'd know what to do, he could help. Tell me it's all alright.... that I did what I had to do...

Harry's thoughts were dark as he walked absently through the deserted corridors of the castle in the early hours of the morning. The walls were so close to him, suffocating. He needed fresh air. His feet took him all the way to the Entrance of the castle and he threw the door open hard,

stepping out into the cold morning still shrouded in darkness.

Harry could see his breath on the air as he sat himself down tiredly at the top of the steps just outside of the door. He sighed heavily and absently rubbed at his scar, trying desperately to forget. So many bad memories, there was only so much a person could take before they shatter like glass on stone. Harry felt a lone tear running down his cheek and he swiped it away angrily. *No weakness* he thought *too many are relying on me....* He looked up into the failing night sky and saw a few remaining stars and also the planet of war shining with a red hue, an awful reminder of reality.

Harry shivered slightly in the cool morning air and looking down he saw he was wearing those striped hospital pyjamas. Without even thinking he waved his hand and the pyjamas transfigured into blue jeans and a thick woolly jumper. He hadn't even uttered a spell; it was just a hand movement and a thought. Harry looked at his hand now and saw the bandage on his right that was hiding the scars left by his wand. *I might have to get a new wand* he thought with a grim humour.

But that wasn't his all consuming thought. The magic coursing through him was. It had grown from the battle, broken free and grown. And it was still doing so. Harry was honestly scared by the power of the blasting curse, scared that he'd done it so easily. It had been an enormous drain on his power but if anyone else had tried that they'd probably be dead.

What's happening to me? he thought, running a hand through his hair nervously. *I feel as if I could Apparate straight through the Hogwart's wards.*

Harry stood up shakily, a bit unsteady on his feet as he had just left the hospital. With a thought he tried to Apparate, but instantly felt the wards against him like a mountain in his path. They were huge, and ultimately powerful. A barrier of impenetrable magic weighed down upon him and prevented Apparation. Harry sat back down with a sigh. He wasn't powerful enough to pass through the wards.... yet.

The morning Sun had slowly begun to rise over the peaks of the mountains in the distance as Harry had been out in the open air. He was watching it absently as the first beams hit his face, warming him and the

area slightly. There was a rustling in the distance and Harry looked over to the forest to see a Thestral soar up above the trees, before sinking back down in a graceful arc. It was then that there was a small tap on Harry's shoulder.

Harry jumped up so fast he almost fell down the steps, but thankfully he didn't. "Did I scare you?" smiled Ginny gently.

Harry relaxed somewhat and leaned against the small brick wall. "You follow me?"

"From the hospital," answered Ginny truthful. "I was on 'Harry' watch...."

"What?" asked Harry, slightly confused.

"We decided it would probably be best if one of us was there when you woke up...." Ginny said, pulling her robes around herself. "Aren't you cold?" she shivered.

"No..." Harry replied quietly, turning away and staring into the nothingness of the castle grounds. Ginny could see his eyes were unfocused, though. He was lost once again in memories.

Ginny hesitated, not sure quite what to say. She decided on the bad news first. "Azkaban was broken open while you slept," she whispered. "It was-"

"I know," Harry sadly whispered. "I saw it in my dreams. About one hundred new followers joined him, all the Aurors died."

Ginny flinched, his visions unbelievably accurate. She thought that she would be used to them by now. "Harry, I-"

"Did anyone tell you what happened in Hogsmeade?" he asked coldly with his fists clenched.

"Only what we read in the papers," Ginny began and Harry sighed. "You duelled with You-Know-Who again and there was a battle between Aurors and Death Eaters. We also heard explosions from here. I was in Magical Creatures when there was this massive explosion and a flashing red light in the distance. At the same time Dumbledore and half

the teaching staff were tearing down the grounds towards the gates."

"...Flashing red light in the distance...." Harry whispered to himself, Ginny heard. "That was me. I killed thirty with that blast...."

Ginny gasped audibly and instantly regretted it when she saw the absolute heartbreaking emotion pass across Harry's face. "You did what you-"

Harry turned around angrily and his emerald green eyes pierced into her amazingly. "What? Did what I had to do? I *hate* having to do what I have to do. I HATE IT!" he cried, a wave of power emanating from him, making his hair and clothes swirl. "But if I don't do it, people I care about will die! I-can't-win, Ginny! Either way someone, somewhere has to die...."

"Harry..." she began, tears in her eyes.

"NO! I had to kill them, I had to," Ginny understood he was begging her to understand, when she already did perfectly. "If I didn't the Aurors would have died. They all would have died! I... I did what I had to..." he finished quietly, frowning at his choice of words. "I didn't get a choice...." he whispered, falling against the stone wall. "It was kill or be killed...."

"Harry," Ginny said forcefully, tears now falling down her cheeks slowly. "What's really bothering you? Causing these outbursts? Something else has happened..."

Harry looked up into her eyes and had to turn away under her piercing gaze. "I... Voldemort said this made us *equal*. That I was just like him now."

It took Ginny only a moment to comprehend and when she did she sighed. "Harry... the fact that you feel guilt, that you feel remorse over what happened, proves that you're different from him. He enjoys it, sadistically so... you save lives of those who are innocent. If anything you two are exact opposites." Ginny said this with such a great conviction in her voice that Harry accepted it.

She's right he thought. *In some respects anyway....* Harry turned to look at her. The morning light wasn't that bright yet but he could still see her clearly enough in the pale light. Ginny was wearing her Hogwarts robes

and a maroon scarf around her neck. She had her hair spread out down past her shoulders and a few strands were blowing slightly in the wind. Tears fell from her chocolate brown eyes and Harry watched one trail down her cheek and fall into the corner of her mouth. He stared at her for one long moment before shaking his head and turning away sharply.

"Harry," Ginny began quietly, having seen the look in his face.

"I have to see Dumbledore," he breathed. "I'll see you all at breakfast," he said hurriedly, stepping passed her and back into the ancient castle.

Ginny stood staring at the forest for a moment in confusion, as all the pieces fell into place. She turned away gracefully as a slow smile played at the corners of her lips.

Harry knocked three times on the old oak door of the Headmaster's office. The plethora of voices inside instantly died down and Dumbledore spoke from within. "Come, he said.

Harry pushed open the door with is good hand and limped slowly into the room, his ankle twinging with pain slightly from the sprain. Before he could even gather his senses someone wrapped their arms around him in a tight embrace. Harry stiffened for a moment before relaxing. "Hello, Mrs. Weasley," he said.

"Oh, Harry," cried Molly Weasley, dabbing at her nose with a tissue. "Can't leave you alone for five minutes can we," she said shakily, her eyes rimmed with tears.

Harry smiled genuinely at her concern and then looked around the room. It appeared he had intruded on an Order meeting. In the room were Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, Tonks, Remus, Kingsley (who had a sling on his arm), Amos Diggory, a few witches Harry had met but could not recall their names, Snape, Mad Eye Moody, McGonagall. Mundungus Fletcher, Sturgis Podmore, Dedalus Diggle, Bill, Charlie, Fred and George Weasley, Hestia Jones, and surprisingly Dernas. They were all either standing or seated around Dumbledore's desk.

"I'm okay, Mrs. Weasley," Harry said gently, separating himself from her

and limping over to Dumbledore's desk, every eye in the room upon him. "What's our response?" asked Harry.

"I beg your pardon, Harry?" said Dumbledore, raising his eyebrows in question.

"Our response," frowned Harry. "To his attack...."

Whispers broke out from the present Order members and Harry turned to stare at each one in turn, the look on his face enough to silence them. "You're just going to sit back and do nothing, aren't you?" Harry growled. It wasn't really a question.

"Now really, Potter-" began Snape, but Harry cut him off.

"Voldemort has pretty much replenished his forces now that Azkaban has fallen. What are we doing?" questioned Harry, annoyance in his voice

Dumbledore had remained silent so far and continued to be so. It was Mr. Weasley that answered Harry. "We've begun training more Aurors, Harry. Though not many want to join... France and some other European Ministries have also agreed to lend us aid."

"About time," Harry mumbled to himself. "How many Aurors are left?" he asked, directing his question towards Kingsley.

Kingsley gave a quick glance to Dumbledore, who just nodded slightly. "Only one hundred and sixty were on hand to get to Hogsmeade yesterday," he began. "One hundred and seven died, twenty three were severely injured, and thirty made it back to the division unscathed. Of the other Aurors who weren't at the battle, twenty five died at Azkaban and two hundred have been recalled to Headquarters. Two hundred and thirty is the exact number available."

Shit Harry thought. "Voldemort has a little over that," he said and several members looked around at each other nervously. "So we cannot retaliate with lesser numbers and Voldemort knows he now holds the upper hand. What do we do?"

Silence reined in the office and Harry was slowly growing more and

more frustrated at the lack of progress. "Professor," Harry began, turning to Dumbledore. "You know as well as I do that Riddle will use this opportunity to crush us."

Every head in the study turned to Dumbledore, who sighed and massaged his temple with one hand. "Perhaps.... I do know that, Harry, but I also believe Tom has other plans."

"Other plans?" questioned Harry.

Dumbledore blinked and then looked to every face in the room. "He wants to destroy you, Harry, before trying to overthrow Britain. It is becoming increasingly difficult to keep you from him, almost impossibly so... You can never leave the Hogwarts grounds again safely."

Harry scowled. "So that means I won't be leaving, doesn't it?"

Dumbledore hesitated for a moment, but then nodded. Every one in the room looked uncomfortable. Harry stared at each in turn before returning his gaze to the Headmaster. Those that knew Harry well would see from the look in his eyes that he was furious.

"Right then," he whispered angrily. "Dermas, I'll see you tomorrow morning for training." Harry nodded to the blade master and without another word turned on his heel and made for the door.

Harry heard Dumbledore and a few others call to stop him but he left before his magic could get the better of him. Anger and his magic reacted dangerously. Harry was down the steps and halfway down the hall when he heard hurried steps behind him and a familiar voice call his name.

"Potter," came the brisk Scottish accent of Professor McGonagall.

Harry stopped, the early morning light shining in his eyes from the window to his left. He took a deep breath and then turned back around to see his head of house catch up with him. "What is it, Professor?" he asked a little roughly.

McGonagall heard his tone and her lips shrank into her patented glare that could make first years cry. "I wanted you to know, Mr. Potter. That

the griffin arrived yesterday afternoon, while you were... visiting... Hogsmeade."

"You mean while I was duelling with Voldemort?" he asked bitterly. His bitterness was directed towards Voldemort though. Harry had completely forgotten about Animagus training over the months, there were a few brief reminders but mostly it had just been one fight after another. "What happens now?" he asked.

McGonagall stared at him seriously for a moment, assessing him. "I'll take you to see it. If it is truly to be your form, you will know."

"How?" asked Harry, rubbing his sore hand and blinking in the growing light. He fell into step beside McGonagall as they walked away down the corridor.

"You will most certainly feel a connection. I myself have felt a live long affiliation with felines, hence my form," McGonagall said matter of fact.

Harry fell once again into his dark thoughts as he followed his head of house down through the well trodden halls of Hogwarts. Most prominent on his mind was the awesome strength of his magic. It had broken out during that damned Cruciatus and now it kept growing inside of him, making him feel alive and immortal. The castle was waking up now and Harry and McGonagall passed a few students in the halls, though no Gryffindors. Most looked at him with a grave respect, others with an unbelievable awe. Harry ignored them all, more worried about his magic.

Things are starting to look dark.... he thought. And they were. Voldemort was gathering followers at an alarming rate. Other countries had finally begun to mobilise and see the Dark Lord as a real threat but there was only so much they could do. Azkaban had been a sore blow and soon Voldemort would have the strength to launch a full assault. *That is* Harry thought *if he kills me...*

Harry and McGonagall had just passed the guest quarters when someone called out to him from behind them. He turned fast but relaxed a moment later when he saw Hermione's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Granger.

"Hi...." he said automatically.

Hermione's parents joined Harry and McGonagall as they continued down through the castle. "Nice to see you up and well, Harry," said Mrs. Granger.

Harry smiled but didn't say anything. Mr. Granger had begun talking to McGonagall so Harry felt he had to talk to Mrs. Granger. "Yeah... I'm fine. Just got a little roughed up yesterday."

Mrs. Granger nodded, sensing Harry didn't want to breach this subject. "Well..." she said. "We might not be here much longer. Albus has agreed that we can safely go back to work now."

Harry frowned. "How?"

Mrs. Granger seemed to think for a moment. "We'll be moving back into the rooms above our surgery until the house can be repaired and while we are there...." she frowned slightly. "Albus mentioned something about magic. The... erm... secret keeper charm?"

Harry nodded. "That's about as safe as you can get. Who's going to be your secret keeper?"

"Excuse me?" questioned Mrs. Granger.

Harry realised she hadn't been told the details of the spell, so as they walked he filled her in on the specifics of the Fidelius Charm. By the time he finished they were in the Entrance Hall.

"Well," nodded Mrs. Granger. "That is amazing. But one of us can't be a secret keeper?" Harry nodded. "Then who do you think will want to risk it?" she asked worriedly, thinking more about the secret keeper's well being than her own.

Harry shrugged. "I'll do it if you want," he said selflessly. "I mean I'm already number one on Voldemort's list and I am the secret keeper for your daughter and Ron here at Hogwart's."

Mrs. Granger had an unshed tear in her eye as she beheld the young man before her. He always risked so much, and won so little. Through all the pain and grief in his life he still managed to turn out alright. Most would have given in long ago if they had to suffer like he did, but not

Harry. "You'd do that for us?" she asked, admiration and respect in her eyes.

Harry nodded, personally he didn't think it was that big of a deal. He looked over to McGonagall still chatting with Mr. Granger in the middle of the hall. "Listen... do you want to come and see a griffin?" he asked, and Mrs. Granger frowned.

"Excuse me?" she smiled.

Harry walked over to McGonagall and Mr. Granger. "Can Hermione's parents come and see the griffin as well?" he asked McGonagall.

"If they wish to, Mr. Potter," McGonagall replied, raising her eyebrows in question to Mr. Granger.

"I think that would be something to see," he said, looking thoughtful as Mrs. Granger nodded.

It was decided then. The four of them walked over to and through the aging doors of the castle. Harry recalled being there an hour earlier and remembered speaking with Ginny. He smiled slightly but that fell when the cold struck him. It was still early morning, not gone seven thirty yet and even though it was later in the day, Harry felt colder than when he'd been out here previously. Perhaps he hadn't felt the cold before, as he was too washed up in his emotions. He certainly knew that Ginny had felt the cold, but he didn't think much of it then.

As the castle was heated magically in the mornings, he and the Grangers hadn't been dressed that warmly and they all shivered slightly in the cool wind now. The ground was also slushy as the snow had finally begun to melt after many months of winter. It was still ankle deep on the ground, though, but there was really no chance that more would fall.

Without even really thinking about it, Harry waved his hand in front of him and cast a particularly powerful heating charm. What's more he had also charmed it to follow them, so he didn't have to constantly recast it. Harry realised a moment later what he had done and frowned. He had barely even thought of it before it happened. He looked over to McGonagall who had drawn her lips into a line and was looking at him

questioningly. He didn't answer.

"That's better,' Mrs. Granger commented. "Magic is an amazing thing."

They made small conversation as they walked down through the snowy grounds towards Hagrid's cabin. Harry felt a slight apprehension as they approached but it was really just excitement. To be able to transform would be amazing, though it would take a few months.

Harry heard it before he saw it. A loud, unmistakable sound of an eagle ripped across the quiet grounds. It was answered by the call of another ferocious creature, the Chimera that Hagrid had had imported. And then there it was. As Harry, McGonagall, and the Grangers walked over the rise in the grounds that hid Hagrid's from view, another cry broke the quietness and Harry first beheld the creature he was one day to become.

It was in a paddock next to the Chimera, though they were separated a great distance. Hagrid was in the chimera paddock and was feeding the beast, but Harry only barely realised that before his gaze was drawn back to the griffin. It had to be the most proud creature Harry had ever seen, more so than a Hippogriff. It was elegant as well. Standing tall on a rocky outcrop in its enclosure the griffin turned and its eyes locked with Harry's. Eye's as sharp as eagles, for the creature was part eagle. It had the head, beak, neck, wings, and talons of an eagle on its front to legs. The body was that of a lion and its hind quarters had paws in a glowing sand yellow coat. A long, majestic tail also swung back and forth slowly at the animal's rear.

Harry and the Grangers were stunned to say the least, though Mr. and Mrs. Granger's eyes flew back and forth between the chimera and the griffin. Harry, for his part, never thought that seeing one of these beasts in person could be so thrilling. He knew without a doubt that he would one day transform into this creature.

"A male griffin from the mountains of India," said McGonagall, beginning to lead the group down the small hill. "From what we can tell he is twelve years of age, which is barely just out of infancy for griffins, which live from anything between two hundred to five hundred years."

"It is unbelievable," commented Brian Granger, shaking his head.

The four of them came to the edge of the paddock housing the griffin and the creature slowly turned to face them. Harry kept his eyes on it for a moment before glancing over to the chimera paddock. "Alright, Hagrid?" he called.

"Yer be careful there, Harry," Hagrid replied, chucking a piece of meat to the chimera. "Jus' fed the griffin but they can be a bi' temp'ramental. If yer follow me..."

"Thanks, Hagrid," Harry called back and turned to face McGonagall. "What next?" he asked.

"Well, Potter, I want you to study it, down to the last detail. You have worked on altering parts of your body. I want you to now work on altering them further." McGonagall lifted her gaze over to the griffin. "That is... if a griffin is to be your form...?"

"It is," said Harry without a doubt, jumping over the wooden planks of the griffin's enclosure.

"Be careful, Harry," McGonagall said quickly. "Approach it if you wish, but remember it is an intelligent creature. Show it respect..."

Harry nodded and then turned back towards the griffin. The creature's sharp eagle eyes were now level with Harry's. It remained stoically still, only slightly tilting his head in assessment of Harry. Remembering his dealings with Hippogriffs, Harry held its gaze and tried not to blink. Slowly he took a few steps forward and the beast leapt from the rock it had stood upon and with a cry dug its claws into the earth.

Harry paused and hesitated for a moment as the griffin emitted an ear piercing screech. After it he heard Mrs. Granger's gasp and McGonagall call him back, but Harry held its gaze. He felt compelled to walk over to the animal, to touch it if he could. And that feeling outweighed his one of fear.

The cool breeze of winter's last grasp swirled through the trees of the forest and across the icy grounds, rustling Harry's hair. He walked calmly and with a surprising confidence over to the griffin, which stared at him with golden eyes. Harry was close now, so close he could feel the

griffin's warm breath. He saw its claws scrape up the earth as he approached, but that didn't deter him.

There was barely a three foot distance between the two of them now and Harry could tell that the griffin's eyes held a questioning look at his presence. Harry's returned the look and slowly he raised his arm, thinking about one day being able to become this creature. A surge of magic rippled through him at this moment and Harry heard and saw a faint crackle at the tips of his fingers. The griffin saw it as well and backed up uncertainly.

"It's okay," Harry whispered. "I'm not going to hurt you...."

The griffin cocked its eagle head as if it thought that idea absurd. If it wanted to, it could kill Harry in the blink of an eye. Both Harry and the griffin knew this. Harry let out a long held breath and then, with a slight smile, stepped forward and placed his hand on the feathers of the Griffin's neck.

Harry had expected to feel coarse feathers as he would on Hedwig, and normally he would have. But this time pain ripped through his entire body.

"Did he seem alright, Ginny?" asked Ron.

Ginny frowned and gave a moment's thought to her answer. She, Ron, Hermione and Neville had all just sat down to breakfast in the Great Hall. Having only spent a few minutes in his company, she wasn't entirely sure. "He feels guilty over what happened," she sighed. "He killed some Death Eaters."

Hermione, Ron, and Neville paled. They all knew it was Harry's job to fight, his seemingly inescapable fate to kill, but that didn't lessen the blow any. They themselves knew it may one day come to that for them but they hoped it would at least be after they left school. Harry had once again shown that he had *never* been a child... *never*.

"Oh, dear..." whispered Hermione. "Did he- did he say who it was? Was it a Death Eater he knew?"

Ginny blinked and then looked down, a deep sigh escaping her lips. "It was thirty Death Eaters..." Ron's fork clattered to the floor. "And he did it with one curse...."

Silence and disbelieving looks immediately masked Ron and Neville's faces. Hermione however fell into deep thought. "He must have fused spells...." she mumbled to herself. "But enough to kill thirty? The power alone should have killed *him!*"

"And he already knew about Azkaban. He saw it in his dreams." Ginny said finally, looking up to the Head table in time to see Dumbledore, Snape, Moody, and Dermal take their seats. Harry's other special teachers also lined the table. Ginny thought though, that Dumbledore and Snape both looked deeply troubled.

Twenty Minutes Earlier

Snape watched with a growing irritation as Potter snapped at the Order, the organisation that had kept him alive for so many years. True there had been a few mistakes made, but when dealing with Potter it was to be expected. Snape himself had more than once saved the boy's life, even though he couldn't care less what happened to him. He only did it because Potter was the world's only chance of one day knowing peace.

"Right then," Harry whispered angrily. "Dermal, I'll see you tomorrow morning for training." Harry nodded to the blade master and without another word turned on his heel and made for the door.

Snape remained silent as Dumbledore and a few others called for Potter to stop. He remained silent as Dumbledore sighed, showing his age. *He has been doing that more and more frequently as of late* Snape thought. And he remained silent as the Headmaster sent McGonagall down after the troubled boy.

That was it for the meeting, though. Potter had seen to that. Dumbledore thanked the Order and then dismissed them. Those who were remaining at the castle left the same way Potter did, the others using the floo. After a few minutes the room was emptied of all save Dumbledore, himself,

and the phoenix. This was when Snape gave his personal report that others were not to hear.

"How is Tom taking his defeat at Hogsmeade, Severus?" asked the old Headmaster as Snape took a seat in front of his desk.

Snape smirked at the question. "He doesn't see it as a defeat, Albus. Not when he reclaimed so many followers from Azkaban. He sees it more as a test of Potter's power, to know what he is up against."

Dumbledore nodded, his wizened brow creasing into a frown. "Azkaban..." he whispered. "That was a sore blow that I did not see coming."

"Nor did I, Headmaster. I was not informed of the attack on Hogsmeade or the destruction of Azkaban last night. My position may have been compromised." Snape said this without any fear.

Dumbledore surveyed his Potions Master, Spy, Colleague, and to a lesser extent, friend. "If you wish to cease answering his summons, I understand," Dumbledore said warily.

Snape bristled and their eyes met. "Headmaster," Snape said with a hint of venom. "My loyalty to the Order makes that impossible."

Dumbledore saw the double meaning in his reply. Snape had been insulted by his suggestion to leave the Death Eaters, after he had had to convince so many of his loyalties to join them after Voldemort had been resurrected. That had been a painful experience he would not like to repeat. But to Snape it gave his life meaning, even after all the terribly deeds in his past. He had found something worth living for, and to give that up would leave him with nothing as long as the Dark Lord lived.

Dumbledore blinked and stroked Fawkes gently. "I apologise, Severus," he said after a moment. It was another moment before he spoke again. "Tell me, how do you think young Harry is coping?"

Snape stared at the Headmaster for a moment. It wasn't often Dumbledore asked his opinion on Potter's current state. But at times, such as after the business with the Philosopher's Stone, the basilisk, and then his resurrection, it was evident Albus needed to know how

others perceived Harry. Snape couldn't be sure why the old man felt like that, maybe over the years he had come to love the boy? He wouldn't be surprised nor would he care, that emotion was not for him. Though the headmaster had phrased his question so as not to appear to love the boy. He held a passionate, vested interest in Potter's well being, but had hid it as an intellectual conviction.

"I believe Potter will manage. He has proven his worth time and time again. If anything he will learn from this experience and realise to kill will become part of his nature..." Dumbledore had asked for his view, and Snape had given it.

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows in question, but slowly nodded. Fawkes sensing his master's distress sung sadly. "But being so young, Severus."

"If he is foolish enough to openly challenge the Dark Lord at such a young age then he is going to have to learn that the fight will be brought home to him," Snape said matter of fact.

"And do you believe what he said a moment ago?" asked Dumbledore. "That we are doing nothing?"

Snape really thought about this one. On some level he could identify with Potter, see his reasoning. But there was also a lot going on in the Order that Potter wasn't aware of. They were not sitting back and giving Voldemort a clear run to victory. "I do not believe that is true, Albus, and I don't think Potter believes it either."

Dumbledore wearily nodded again and Snape felt a pang of sadness that would never show on his face. He didn't know the Headmaster's exact age, but it was in the region of one hundred and fifty. "Maybe I am getting to old," Dumbledore mused, reflecting Snape's thoughts. "How do I know I'm making the right choices anymore?"

If it had come from anyone else, even Voldemort, Snape would have seen it as weakness. But coming from Dumbledore it worried him. "May I ask what has brought these thoughts on, Headmaster?" Snape asked.

Dumbledore sobered and sat up a little taller in his chair. "The current

state of things, the coming darkness. How did it come to this?" he asked himself. "My views I've held all my life are challenged as Harry and Tom continue their fight. It is as if the entire world is just a spectator to their battle...."

Snape shook his head and responded with his calm, cool logic. "All of us need our deeply held views challenged from time to time, Albus... even if only to remind us why we've got them."

"Ever the Slytherin, Severus?" smiled Dumbledore, stroking Fawkes' neck.

"Of course," Snape responded, his patented smirk firmly in place. "Perhaps we should make our way to breakfast now, Headmaster?"

"Indeed," agreed Dumbledore, rising from his old chair, almost as old as the man himself. "Thank you, Severus," he said finally.

Harry had expected to feel coarse feathers as he would on Hedwig, and normally he would have. But this time pain ripped through his entire body.

Mrs. Granger cried out and McGonagall had her wand out in the blink of an eye. Harry's screams ripped across the grounds and the griffin leapt back from him quickly, his own screech piercing the early morning as well. McGonagall stared unbelievably at the scene before her for a moment. Everything she had ever known about transfiguration telling her that what was happening now was impossible. But it was happening, and all Harry had done was touch the animal.

Harry screamed as his bones and nerves scorched as if burned. It felt as if Voldemort had just cast the Cruciatus on him like in Hogsmeade. In the rational part of his mind he wondered what was happening, he had only touched the griffin, that's all. His magic had twinged slightly as he had approached, but that was it.... and now pain ripped through his body and it felt as if his limbs and skin was being stretched to breaking point.

A few seconds after the pain began he fell to the ground, his eyes blind and closed tightly. Over and through the pain and his own screams he

picked up a few words of those near him.

"Ge' him ou' of there," called Hagrid.

"Absolutely impossible," McGonagall said with a slight fear in her voice.

"What is happening?" asked Mr. Granger.

Harry no longer heard the voices as they were replaced with a loud, deep ringing that was deafening. The pain had seemed to climax now as it was remaining constant, neither worsening nor lessening. It remained like this for a long minute, but then Harry slowly started to breathe deeply, shaking slightly from the pain, which had now thankfully lessened.

It fell still lower and he opened his eyes, still feeling slightly stretched and worn out. He wondered what the hell had happened to him and turned to face McGonagall. What he saw was a blurry mess, he could make out the form of his head of house but it was all out of focus. *Must have lost my glasses* he thought. But he dismissed that idea when he saw the castle behind him. It was tinged green, and everything at that distance was in crystal clear clarity. Harry could make out the individual bumps in the stone where the joins were made. *What...?* He cried out in his mind, knowing something was amiss.

Harry blinked and made to move but felt an unexpected weight that at the moment he was powerless to remove. He blinked again and looked deeply at McGonagall, who had now come into focus, though it was a lot sharper focus than what Harry was used to. "*Professor-*" Harry tried to speak but a series of low screeches were all that were emitted from his mouth. He made to stand up and reached out an arm-

Harry shouted out loud at the sight of his arm, which was long and thin, complete with the glowering sharp talons of an animal. It wasn't a human arm. His cries came out as loud, desperate screeches to McGonagall, who now pointed her wand at Harry. Through his fear and confusion Harry saw this and realised a moment later what she was about to do. For it made sense now, sort of. He didn't know how it had happened but it had, he had become a Griffin...

Harry found that even in the mere seconds he had been in his animal

form; he already had control over most of his senses. So much so that he heard what McGonagall said and saw the golden thread of magic that connected him to her wand, to her Animagus spell. It was the same one used by Remus and Sirius back in third year at the Shrieking Shack. The spell that had forced Wormtail to revert from his rat form and back into a human.

It worked now. Harry felt the spell forcing him, willing him to turn back into a human. The only problem was... he didn't know how. He felt the power behind the spell increase and he started to feel a dull ache in his... he supposed it was what he would call a chest of a griffin. The feeling slowly spread through his legs and up his neck, into his head. It wasn't very painful but it was most certainly uncomfortable.

After a moment the pain started to increase and Harry worked on closing his eyes. Everything felt different as a griffin and it took a long second for him to get control of his eyelids. Harry breathed in deeply through his sharp, curved... beak... and concentrated on his human form. He tried to imagine himself as he was as a human. His scar he concentrated on the most, on his slightly pale face. The skin around the jagged scar was slightly enflamed, giving his forehead a rough tinged look, as if it were sunburnt. He recalled his other scars on other parts of his body. His leg, back, cheek, arm, and hand. All recent additions.

It was then that Harry felt a different kind of consciousness in his mind. It frightened him at first but after a moment he felt a familiarity with it, as if it had always been there, just never thought of. It wasn't like his mind connection with Voldemort, it was instinct. Animal instinct. Harry felt the sudden urge to spread his wings and fly. Being on his side he couldn't do that, but he knew the experience would be incredible.

Harry's human consciousness fought against that, though. The rational part of him thinking that there will be time for that later, right now you have to become human again. So Harry concentrated once more as the spell McGonagall was still casting increased in strength. It was really starting to hurt now.

Human... he thought, his mind identifying things unique to his body.

You are human...

Human...

HUMAN! Come on!

Harry felt a short, but sharp stab in intense pain and then all was quiet. His eyes were tightly closed and he felt his heart beating heavily in his chest. Lazily he put an arm across his chest to catch his breath, but then snapped open his eyes. Harry sat up so fast it was a blur. The first thing he noticed were his very human legs moving before him in his very human jeans. He looked down to his arms and sighed with relief. Quickly he ran a hand through his hair and then tentatively touched his scar. *Ouch* he winced when the familiar pain whisked through it. *Damn it* he thought angrily. *Why the hell did that just happen?*

"Harry..." McGonagall said shakily, her voice audible even over the screeches the other griffin, momentarily forgotten, was making as Hagrid tried to calm the beast.

Harry looked through blurry eyes at her and then over to the stunned expressions upon Mr. and Mrs. Granger's faces. His mind reeled and he slowly, feeling slightly nauseous, got to his feet. "Harry, you just-" McGonagall began, taking a step forward but Harry cut her off.

"Stay away," he said through deep breaths, raising his hand as a shield charm magically popped into existence. Harry frowned and then looked at his palm. *Jesus...* he thought. *I can barely control it anymore.*

"Harry, why don't you sit down?" offered McGonagall, conjuring a chair. She was obviously trying her best to understand what was going on.

"No..." he gasped, wincing as he brushed his bandaged hand against his side. "I've got to... got to go sort this out."

And with that he was off. As fast as he could Harry ran from the paddock, jumped over the fence and was off towards the castle. He didn't heed the calls from McGonagall, Hagrid, the Grangers.... or the griffin.

Chapter 25 - I Tried So Hard

His will was set, and only death could break it...

-- JRR Tolkien (LOTR)

Harry raced up the grounds as fast as he could; ignoring the pain it placed on his sore ankle. He didn't stop until the great castle doors loomed up before him and then, on a sprint, he jumped up the steps and through them. He paused in the empty Entrance hall to catch his breath and to try and grasp what had just happened. Sounds of laughter and talk drifted from behind the closed doors of the Great Hall, but he didn't want to face the school yet.

Okay he thought, *breathe...* Harry panted heavily for a moment and fell back against the stone wall just to the left of the entrance doors and near the House point hourglasses. *How did it happen?* he asked himself. *Magic...* he replied dryly. However it happened, however he became the griffin for a moment, it was still there. Harry could now feel a separate consciousness in his mind, a feeling that belonged there as if it always had been. He knew it was his Animagus ability and he knew he could use it if he concentrated enough.

Harry sighed and took a few shaky steps forward. As big as it may be, the Animagus transfiguration was one of his lesser problems right now. The main one was the catalyst for all this, the strength inside of him, the growing power of his magic. It was so desperate to be used that Harry was now doing magic without realising it. Things like clothes transfiguration and heating charms, his magic responded to his need and did it without a second thought. He had to get it under control, and he had to do it fast.

That was it he thought, looking up the stairs, realisation dawning in his eyes. Harry set off at a walk, passed the smells of breakfast and the sound of the school from the Great Hall. He thought briefly that he must have been given some nutrition potions in hospital to not feel hungry. *That should last me until dinner* he thought. *Eleven or so hours to do this...*

Harry picked up the pace and, after a few secret passages and one close encounter with Peeves, was standing outside the Room of Requirement. He looked from the statue to the left, to the stone wall on his right. *Okay* he thought. *Okay...* Harry began to walk back and forth passed the wall and back to the statue. *I need a big open space, preferably a field. Somewhere to train, to be able to cast curses and spells. And a place to run...*

The wooden door of the room popped into existence to his left and Harry stopped his pacing. A moment later he entered the room and smiled. A long grassy field stretched out before him. It was an idyllic countryside view, complete to the last detail. A blue sky shone with a brilliant summer sun overhead and there were even a few birds flying around. The field stretched on for what could well have been miles before his feet and shin high wheat grass covered it and swayed slightly in the breeze. There was a line of trees in the distance and running down the centre of the field, was a long winding creek that cumulated in a deep pool down by a bank. Whatever magic had created the Room of Requirement, it was very specific.

Harry entered the room and felt a strange sensation as he left stone and passed into a green countryside. The door closed behind him and Harry required it not to open unless he required it to. He saw a burrow of rabbits in the distance drinking from the creek and smiled. *It was perfect.* With a sigh Harry took off his shoes and socks and walked over the field, towards the creek. It felt good to feel the warm summer grass between his toes, as oppose to the frost and snow that was the outside world. As he reached the creek Harry dipped down and scooped up some water in his cupped hands. It was cool and fresh as he swallowed it and he let out another sigh afterwards. He was thirsty after his run to the castle.

Right he thought, straightening up and turning around. He noticed with a smile that the door leading back to the castle had disappeared, leaving nothing but nature in its place. *Let's begin....*

Ginny said her goodbyes to Ron, Hermione, and Neville on the second floor as she had Charms first up that morning. She walked alone up the

warm, friendly castle stairs towards the Charms department, lost deep in thoughts about a dark haired bespectacled boy.

Ginny entered the Charms room last and just in time as well. She took a seat on her own at the back as everyone else was finding seats and a moment later Luna Lovegood joined her.

"Morning, Luna," said Ginny absently, pushing a strand of hair back behind her ear and taking one or two books out of her bag.

"Good morning, Ginevra," Luna said dreamily, staring into space.

Ginny shrugged, Luna would always be Luna. And, apart from her mother on occasion, she would be the only one that would ever use her full name. After everyone was seated little Professor Flitwick announced, to the dismay of most, that today's lesson would be a theory one. Ginny didn't care one way or the other, so she opened her textbook to the required chapters and began to read.

The class was silent and a lone beam of sunlight fell palely onto Ginny's desk as her eyes lazily skimmed the long paragraphs of magical theory. It wasn't long before she zoned out and continued to think about Harry. *I hope he's okay* she thought worriedly, thinking back to the state she'd found him in. He had been very distressed.

Her thoughts flipped back to the bright red light in the sky, followed by an explosion and then a deafening silence. Harry's curse, his power. The only way of winning. *He did the right thing* she thought without a doubt. *But God to I hope he is okay...*

Ginny pushed her Charms textbook aside and opened her smooth, black leather journal. *Everlasting Thoughts*. Harry's Christmas present to her, Harry's perfect present to her. She had written in it a fair few times, and each time it was unclear to her who she was writing it for, herself or for Harry. Some of the entries were about him, others about her fears for the coming darkness. And some of the entries were to him, like a letter. Letter's that he would never read, though.

Ginny looked quickly around the room and saw that most had moved on to answering the review questions at the end of chapter. Professor

Flitwick was marking essays at his desk so, after dabbing her eagle feather quill in ink, Ginny began to write.

8th of February

I don't know why I decided to write now; something just seems right about it. It has been one and a half months since you gave me this journal, one and a half months since you nearly died at Hermione's home. Those hours after that in which you were missing were almost as bad as the ones where Dumbledore had told us you had been killed. I had died myself then, but miraculously you came back. You did it again and, just like in the Chamber with Tom, you brought me back with you.

Everything I've written in these pages so far has been about you in some way. I don't know why? I've told myself I don't know why... but I do. Put it down to a childhood crush, years of dreaming about a boy who saved the world. A hero whose name I've known since I was old enough to walk. You were, in many ways, just a legend then. I took you for a bedtime story about Good triumphing over Evil. You couldn't have been real, you didn't seem real, just a legend. Even in a world of magic your life seemed that of fiction. A baby surviving the Avada Kedavra and taking down the most feared Dark Lord ever at the same time. Impossible, unbelievable, not real...

But you were real.

Ron came home from his first year with stories of how he had helped you, became your friend, and together beaten back You-Know-Who again. I didn't believe him, not at first anyway. And then it was my turn to go to Hogwarts, after years of watching my brother's leave for this castle I finally got to go... and I was going with you. That was when it all started.

It seems odd right now to be writing my memories down of a diary in a diary. Tom was another... no, I won't go there. You saved me that year. I spent my pre-Hogwarts years imagining I was with you, having adventures, fighting evil. Silly childhood dreams. But then it actually happened. Not exactly the way I imagined it but it happened just the same. The Chamber was opened, I couldn't help it. Tom seemed so kind, so charming. I opened it, though to be fair I didn't know... yet. But then the school blamed you, their saviour, their hero. Almost everyone turned

on you then and yet you didn't break.

I broke.

I was dying in that Chamber. Tom and a Basilisk preventing me from fighting, from escaping. I was an inch away from death when you arrived. I never told you this, but I could hear you while I was dying on that cold, wet stone. I heard everything you said to Tom, though I wasn't sure what I was hearing at the time. Mixed thoughts, mixed memories. And then you fought a basilisk.

A basilisk!!

The king of snakes. You fought it and you won. Everything after that felt like a dream, I had been saved, saved by the Boy Who Lived. When I woke and saw the basilisk lying dead I knew Tom was gone. But at what cost? It was almost you. You were now the one collapsed on the cold stone, dying. You would never let me know that, though. Too brave and noble. You were ready to die and yet you still wanted to make sure I was okay. Selflessness like that is so rare it is almost nonexistent.

You were a true hero. Rising to the challenge magnificently and then trying to slip away quietly at the end. It was then that I knew, without a single doubt in my mind, that my crush was actually love. But what chance did I have with the Boy Who Lived! Every girl in this school swoons over you, and I bet you don't even know it.

So you defeated Tom, again surviving You-Know-Who. And even after you knew the full truth, you didn't hate me. You cared. We flew out of that chamber on the wings of a phoenix, alive. You had saved me, and you had slain a basilisk. I don't think anyone can claim to have done the same. I tried to ask you many times why you did it.

Why?

Though the answer was quite clear. You are a hero. You would have faced Tom and that basilisk whether I was there or not. But would you have still won if my life wasn't hanging in the balance? I don't know... but I hope so.

You saved the day and the school. You chalked up one more win for the

light and I realised I loved you. But I don't think you saw that I did... Do I have any regrets, for that?

Enough to fill a lifetime....

Ginny snapped up when a siren sounded in the distance that signalled the end of the period. She looked around quickly and saw everyone putting their books and notes away. *I hadn't realised the time* she thought, shaken for a moment. Her eyes briefly scanned the four pages she had just written. *I'll finish you later* she thought with a sigh.

Harry stood up after drinking from the small creek and looked back around the Room of Requirement. It was an amazing room to say the least. To create such a picturesque landscape was a good bit of magic... but Harry pushed those thoughts aside, he had work to do.

His magic was tingling with anticipation. He planned to give it a good work out, use the amounts of untamed power growing in him. From now on he would learn powerful curses, light and dark. Along with his special training and the many magical abilities he had, the next time he met Voldemort would be the last. Or so he hoped. One thing Harry had learned so far over the course of this year, and most of his life, is that he is and will always be the exception to the rule.

He had survived and overcome all three Unforgivables, some more than once. His magic had the potential to be the greatest on the planet, and now he had become an Animagus, but that wasn't really his choice. Also he still had to repeat the transformation, which he didn't want to try just yet.

All in all Harry felt frustrated with himself. He had the power to end a war, but he couldn't use it. He wasn't trained enough, he didn't know enough curses to fight, enough techniques. His teachers would teach him technique, though, so he decided he'd dedicate most of his time to learning curses, charms, and spells. He would practice his wandless and thought magic until he was as proficient in that as he would be with a wand.

A wand he thought. Harry found that he missed his wand. It had been his for four years, saved his life many times. The fact that it was a brother wand had saved his life, but now it was gone. Most likely any new wand wouldn't work as well, it would be weaker than his original. Harry pushed those thoughts aside, he couldn't safely leave the castle as Death Eaters and Voldemort's followers were everywhere. He had been spotted in Hogsmeade and hundreds of people had died.

Thinking of Hogsmeade Harry thought of his dragon armour and wondered where it was. He wasn't wearing it and he hadn't seen it in the hospital. *It must be up in the dorm* he thought. *Ron would have taken care of that.* He remembered that Marcus Elendil, the dragon armourer would be coming to the castle soon, in a week or two, to outfit the DA. *That is* Harry thought nervously, *if he didn't die yesterday.*

Harry shook his head. If he died he died, it's tragic but right now he had other tasks to be doing. Later he would owl Marcus and hope he was still there.

So looking once more at the vast expanse of countryside around him, Harry required the room to give him a certain book he'd seen once before but had never bought. In the blink of an eye a large tome appeared in Harry's hand. It was slightly heavy but Harry sat down at the desk that had just appeared in the middle of the field and placed the book on the wooden flat top. He sat down in the comfortable leather chair and for a moment his gaze lingered on the cover of the book.

Highly Advanced Curse Work: Extreme Caution is Advised.

Harry opened his book to the first page, remembering seeing it in the adult section at Flourish and Blotts. No one under age could purchase this book, but the Room of Requirement didn't care one way or the other. If it was required it would appear. After skimming the introduction Harry flipped to the contents page and looked for a particular curse. He found it after a moment and knew instantly why Voldemort had used that against him. Turning to page six hundred and twelve, Harry read:

The Vestic Curse

The Vestic curse was first invented in the year 998 by the Dark Lord

*Slytherin. Having been at war with the wizarding world for many years, Slytherin had developed many spells that are still used heavily in modern war. Most of his curses were Dark Arts and designed to hurt. His most notable invention would be the Cruciatus Curse, which causes the receiver to suffer an unbearable pain. **Warning: Use of the Cruciatus is strictly forbidden.***

The Vestic curse is designed to kill. Similar to Avada Kedavra, contact with this curse will result in death. The one notable difference between Avada Kedavra and Vestic is that Vestic can be blocked with a powerful Protego shield charm.

Harry stopped reading and his mind flashed back to his duel with Voldemort yesterday. They had both used the Vestic curse. Harry didn't know what it would do when he used it, but he had sensed that it was dark magic. And now he knew, if he had been hit by that it would have been all over.

Owing to its kill status, Vestic is considered an unforgivable by many Ministries throughout the world, though not in Britain, but it is still highly illegal to use against another human being. Once again the only known counter to the Vestic curse is a strong shield charm.

Incantation:

Counter

Curse:

Vestic

Protego

Status: Illegal, kills on contact

Harry stood up and turned around to the empty field, the desk and book behind him. As soon as he stood a target appeared twenty feet away in the open grass of the field. It appeared as one of those Muggle targets he had seen, with a red centre surrounded by blue, yellow, and black circles. It was strapped to bundles of hay.

Looking back once at the book just to make sure he had it right, Harry took a few steps forward and then cracked his knuckles. He eyed the target and then felt the magic tingling in the palm of his hand. After taking a deep breath, he raised his right hand and took aim.

"Vestic!" he shouted, feeling the magic surge up through his arm and out through his palms and fingers. It came out as white in the beginning but

once it was clear of his skin it turned a deep purple. The wave of magic shot across the field and over to the target. It missed by several feet, exploding against the ground, throwing up dirt and grass.

"*Vestic!*" he called again. This one missed as well, but it was a foot or so closer. Harry shot the curse again and again, until finally one connected with the target. The hay went up in purple flames and the target paper was well and truly destroyed. Harry smiled grimly and required it disappear and return undamaged. *I'll remember that one* he thought, *though my aim is terrible.*

Harry sat back down at the desk and turned the book back to the contents. *Practice makes perfect* he thought sadly, looking at the mass of dark curses. He was going to do what he had to, though. Incendio's and stunning charms were no longer going to cut it. This was a war and he needed to hold powerful weapons. By the time he would be done he wanted to be able to remember hundreds of spells, curses, and charms and their counter spells.

Life had taken a turn for the deadly serious yesterday. In fact when Harry looked back to it he saw that he was lucky to have gotten out alive, with his slim knowledge of curses. He now had a thirst to learn as many as he could, after his acceptance to fight yesterday, he wanted to be able to hold his own against any opponent.

Harry's mind flashed to the mounds of the dead, all their blood pooling together, mixing to become one. His eyes dimmed at the memory and he shuddered slightly. He would learn to prevent another massacre; he would learn to end a war. With a deep sigh and a few thoughts about his friends, especially Ginny, Harry turned to the first page of the book, and began to read.

You saved the day and the school. You chalked up one more win for the light and I realised I loved you. But I don't think you saw that I did... Do I have any regrets, for that?

Enough to fill a lifetime....

You have lost so much, so much has been forgotten. There has been so much blood spilt, so many ruined lives and memories. You fought against You-Know-Who alone when anyone else would have fled. Seen that they couldn't win. You don't see it that way, though. You saw it as a chance to prove yourself, to prove that your existence mattered. Even if you weren't the Boy Who Lived, I could tell you it still mattered.

Our lives are slipping away. Another moment gone is another moment lost and one that brings us closer to the end. Your end is going to be a happy one, you can't fail... you don't know how. I cried for hours in bed at night after you told us the prophecy. It wasn't fair, hadn't you done enough? Shouldn't someone else take a stand, other than you? You had accepted it, though. You strive against your failure, against the otherwise certainty of it. One boy against the Dark Lord. You will win, because you have to. Just like you saved me, because you had to. You don't see another option, you will always be the one to take a stand against him.

I don't know where I'm going with this letter. I know you will never see it, I'll never show it to you. I might just burn it when I'm done, who knows? I guess I'm doing it because I'm confused. The way you looked at me this morning, as if all my feelings and emotions were laid bare. I saw what you felt also, and I dared not believe it.

"Why do you have a griffin, Hagrid?" asked Hermione. Sixth year Gryffindors now had Care of Magical Creatures. As Harry was blasting away with slightly illegal curses, they were sketching the magnificent creature.

"Oh... its -er- fer NEWT studies," Hagrid said quickly, covering the truth. "One of the less dangerous creatures I've had thou'..." he ended, getting a small laugh.

"I bet Harry would love to see this," Ron said aloud and Hagrid smiled slightly.

"We'll bring him down later," Hermione said. "How about we come see you tomorrow night, Hagrid," she offered. "I know we were supposed to

come yesterday but... well... you know..."

"Aye," Hagrid replied. "Come up jus' 'bout five, then?"

"Okay," agreed Ron, their classes ended at four tomorrow.

"Ouch...." Harry winced, sucking in a deep breath. He had just read about a particular nasty bone breaking curse. It looked painful to the receiver. None the less he committed it to memory anyway.

<i>Incantation:</i>				<i>Cusindeo</i>
<i>Counter</i>	<i>Curse:</i>	<i>Protego</i>	<i>Shield</i>	<i>charm</i>
<i>Status: Use by Aurors only, breaks bone on contact</i>				

After five shots at the target Harry had it down. His magic seemed insatiable. No matter how many curses he threw, it didn't seem to tire him or drain him in any way. His power was incredible and only matched by Dumbledore's and Voldemort's. But the day was coming when he would out class even them.

Minutes passed into hours and Harry shot curse after endless curse. At one point he began to practice thought magic and conjured metal balls to shoot at him through the air. Without even raising his hand he stopped the metal with a thought and either made them fall to the ground or shoot back the way they came. It was a useful ability and Harry wanted to extend it further, but there was something else that needed to be done first. When he next looked at his watch he saw that it was coming up two o'clock.

Harry decided it was time to do what he had been putting off all day. What he had been a little bit frightened of. The Animagus Transfiguration. After he required the desk and curse tome to disappear, Harry stood unmoving in the middle of this countryside illusion. He felt around in his mind for the connection to the griffin, sieved through all the pain and personal anguish to find what he instinctively knew was his animal side.

The wind blew warmly around him and the grass swayed in time to it. He heard the creek water running over rocks, causing a soft trickle. Birds flew overhead and Harry took a deep breath. In his mind it felt as though

there was a finger probing around for the right information. He felt his magic, which was manifesting itself in a deep well, he saw his memories of the past fight, and then finally he touched on something foreign, that felt as if it didn't belong, but at the same time did without a doubt.

Harry hesitated for a moment and then, forcefully, pushed on this separate consciousness, tapping in to it. The effect was instantaneous. Harry shut his eyes tight as a painful ripple tore across his body, but it only lasted a brief second and when he opened his eyes he was a little bit higher from the ground and he was standing on two paws and two talons.

Harry would have smiled if he possessed a mouth to do so, what he had was the sharp, curved beak of an eagle. He had done it again, he didn't know how it worked but it did. He must have somehow bonded with the griffin that morning and his magic and mind had forced him into the form, knowing it was what he wanted, what he would be one day anyway. The power in him had cut down the training time from months to mere seconds. And the end result had been this, Harry was a griffin.

It felt very different being in this form. Harry tried to take a few steps forward, but immediately fell over his paws, coming crashing down hard on the grass, landing on his side. He screeched in protest and frustration. It took him a minute or so to feel around and find the right muscles and appendages to use in standing back up, but after that he was back on his legs. This time Harry concentrated on moving his left eagle claw forward and did so after a few seconds. He then brought his back paw forward and did the same thing for his other side. Smiling happily to himself in his human mind, he had just taken his first step as a griffin.

Ginny sat quietly at the back of the room in Defence Against the Dark Arts, as the entire class took notes on the Unforgivable curses from the textbook. She smoothed her hand over the cover of her diary and then slowly opened it to the current page, dabbing a quill with ink as she did. Having spent so much time around Harry, she pretty much knew the properties and what not of the Unforgivables, so she began to write again.

I know you're frightened to get closer to anyone than you already are. You don't want to make anyone a bigger target for him, and that in itself is reason enough for me to love you. I did see something in your eyes this morning, mixed in with the grief and pain. And God I thought it was love... was I right?

You keep yourself locked away, hiding from the truth while the world grows dark around us. So much has happened that should have killed you, that should have let him win. But through several cruel twists of Fate and luck you're still here. I guessed it was Ethan who taught you to Apparate and I also guessed who his father was.... another cruel twist of fate.

Ethan was like you in many respects. You are both orphans, both had hard childhoods devoid of love and yet you both ended up possessing a set of unbreakable morals that shake the foundations of our world and magic. It makes me wonder what happened to Tom to set him on the path he is now on. He was an unloved orphan and he chose to destroy. What small event decided that?

Whatever happened, Ethan died at Tom's hand and you pulled through again, coming out stronger than when you went in. And that is one of the reasons I love you. No matter how much this life throws at you, you face it head on and always fight. Not many people do the same and it is the individuals like you who are meant to make a difference.

So I guess I get to the main point of this now. That look in your stunningly green eyes that I saw this morning. So unexpected, so beautiful.... I, for once, saw passed the walls you keep up so well to keep out the pain and anger. I saw that you are not the invincible Boy Who Lived that this whole school thinks you are, that you are just as scared as the rest of us, and that you need someone to help you through. Someone to hold.

No one can live if all the emotion they ever feel is pain and anger. That is all Tom felt and he is very close to destroying our world now. It will eventually get to you too and then nothing would be worth living for. So... just in case you ever read this:

I love you, Harry Potter.

It had taken many failed attempts but after about half an hour, Harry felt confident enough to run slightly in his griffin form. It was more instinct than anything that had helped him to learn so fast. He just plain *knew* how to do it.

In another ten minutes he was running freely across the field, mindful of all the bumps and rocks in his path. His animal senses were a lot more heightened than his human ones and his eyes in particular were as sharp as needles. He could make out every indistinct bump or contusion in the earth and ran over it without a care, his legs seeming to fall exactly where they needed to.

His hearing was excellent as was his sense of smell. He could practically taste the air and feel it running across his body. There was also an extra sense, one that he couldn't quite figure out yet what it was for. He felt, more than saw, the way the wind was blowing up in the sky, he just knew where hot and cold winds clashed and could see where it changed direction. If he sniffed he could sense when it changed direction and also taste the pressure of it. It was as if all his five senses were especially tuned into the wind. It took only a few minutes thought to realise why and when Harry did his heart skipped a beat.

He could fly!

Sure enough Harry felt the joints in his back near the base of his neck where two impressive wings were folded into his body. It took a few moments of testing and pushing to successfully spread them and when he did the surprise in his mind must have shown in his sharp eyes.

Two six foot long wings stretched from his body, connected to the part of him that was a lion. An impressive wingspan that stretched three times as long as his whole body. They were as strong as dragon hide and as smooth as silk. Each one was covered in hundreds of eagle feathers that all grew aerodynamically for his body, providing the very means for flight. Harry curved one through the air around him and it sliced through it majestically, making a *whooshing* sound as it went.

As with running and pretty much everything else to do with his new form,

Harry instinctively knew how to use his wings for flight. He knew he had to push off from the ground and catch the wind so as to push himself higher. It would be a lot of flapping at the beginning until he reached a safe height and then it would be gliding on the wind, surfing the wind. Harry longed to try it.

Knowing that magic made this room appear as big as he required it to, while being unnoticeable from the outside in the castle, he spread his wings, only slightly as he didn't want to catch the wind yet. He would need to run and get to a good speed before pushing himself hard off the ground and up into the air. At that point his wings would start flapping and hopefully get taken by the air, propelling him up even further. It was what his instincts were telling him, what he knew to do... but doing it would be the real trick.

So Harry prepared himself, walking around for a bit first, back and forth, leaving claw and paw marks in the earth. And finally he decided to go for it. As fast as a lightning he broke into a run and was easily running at speeds of forty miles in under six seconds. His speed increased as he ran further across this wide open field and after only going twenty five feet and reaching a speed of about seventy, Harry braced his back legs and then with a great screech threw himself up into the air, his wings opening of their own volition.

Again instinctively he began flapping them hard, beating the air around him. It took only a moment for the air to propel him up higher and the more he flapped the higher he rose. Like on a broomstick Harry rose fast, faster than he reckoned and before he could really understand it, he was no longer flapping but gliding and the wind flew under and over his wings as he cut through it. He was higher than any time he'd been on his broom in a Quidditch match, but not as high as he'd been yesterday when he had sat in the clouds and created the fused blasting curse. However high he was it was still an amazing feeling none the less.

He was surfing the wind, his senses telling him what to expect from all directions as the air buffeted around him. Right now his wings were stretched to full expanse and he was only gliding in slow circles. There was no flapping to give him more height so he was slowly falling back to the earth, his feeling of joy higher than it had been for months.

This was what flying was supposed to be like... he thought. It was a hundred times more thrilling than being on a broomstick and it just felt... right. With a tremendous flap of his wings Harry soared up another twenty feet, the air and wind carrying him most of the way. *God is Voldemort going to get a surprise the next time we meet* Harry thought happily, letting out an ear piercing cry from his eagle beak.

He rolled on the air, quickly changing direction, feeling before it happened what the wind in the new area would be like and how it would affect him. It was amazing, he was a bird in flight, the sky was his and he could do what he wanted. Harry didn't know how long he spent in the air, breaking left, rolling, diving, gliding and manipulating the air around him, but eventually his human sense overcame his animal yearning to fly and he decided it was probably time to land.

Now that was easier thought than done. As it had been for the take off and flight, instinct had guided Harry and he supposed there was some for landing as well. He didn't want to land so hard he snapped every bone in his body from the impact, that wouldn't do. He decided on a course of action and slowly began to glide back towards the earth, two thousand feet below. Harry glided in circles so as not to come in too fast and after a minute he was at one thousand feet. Thirty seconds later and he passed five hundred, his heightened senses picked up that the air was a lot warmer down here than it was higher up, and he braced himself for landing.

His human part of his mind supposed it shouldn't be much different than landing like a plane did, coming in on an angle and then running off the speed of the landing. It wasn't anything like that, though, and his instincts, which he had been relying on pretty much since the transformation, took over. Harry had now dropped to just under one hundred feet and the ground was approaching fast, too fast. He arched his wings backwards and slowly began to wash off some speed. This slowed him down immensely, but not enough so he simply fell from the sky, dropping like a stone. The glide was smooth now as the ground approached and Harry felt, without a doubt, that his landing would be just as smooth.

And it was.

Harry arced in gracefully, folding his wings to an angle parallel to the ground and then, after pushing back slightly so his back legs would make contact first and begin to run, Harry's front half fell only a moment after that and barely two metres later he came to a full stop, his wings folded away and his tail swinging slowly. The earth beneath him was marked with deep grooves where he had landed. He had done it, he had landed and it had been good, one of the best feelings in his life. A part of him wanted to go again, get back up in the sky and fly once more, but another part realised that people were probably wondering where he was. As much as he wanted to fly, he didn't want to worry his friends.

Harry was a lot calmer and more comfortable in his griffin form than he had been at any moment before this. It just felt right, he couldn't explain the feeling any more than that. It was as if he had always been a griffin and that was who he was. He felt as if as soon as he changed back to his human form, all he would want was to be a griffin again. *Well* he thought, *let's find out...*

It happened almost instantly this time. Harry felt around his consciousness for the same feeling of pressure he had found to transform him into a griffin. He felt for the same feeling to turn back. It appeared to him straight away, without a moment's searching. As soon as he had thought it, it happened. His whole body jerked with a quick stab of pain and then when he opened his eyes, he was kneeling on the ground, back in his jeans and shirt, as a human.

Harry just kneeled there for a moment, feeling the slight breeze in his hair, savouring what he had just experienced. He didn't know how long it would be before he could try again, so for now he just wanted to enjoy it. After a few minutes he glanced at his wristwatch and was slightly shocked to see it was coming up three thirty. He had been flying for well over an hour.

Oh well he thought. *Time to make an appearance....*

Harry smiled and stood up and, as he did, the room turned into the one used for the Defence Association. The next meeting for it was tomorrow night, Friday. He would have to explain the armour and then the rules to the new members. There was a lot to do, but it could be handled in time.

After a last look around the room, Harry exited back into the castle, the stone cold after spending so long in a bright field. He felt better after using his magic so much; he didn't feel as if it was going to burst out of him at any moment. He felt relatively normal, for once.

Harry had only taken a few steps down the deserted corridor when there was a loud, quick tapping sound emanating from somewhere. He found the source instantly as a window to his left, but it was what was sitting on the sill that was making the tapping noise.

"Hedwig?" Harry said, slightly surprised. He wasn't expecting any post from anyone. With a confused frown Harry leaned over and unclasped the window, opening it inwards so his snowy white owl could fly in. Hedwig did so without a moment's hesitation and landed on his shoulder gently.

Harry made to remove a letter from her leg, but there wasn't one... "What do you want, girl?" he asked, starting to walk again. Hedwig just hooted and pecked his ear affectionately. She just wanted to be with him. Harry smiled and headed back towards the common room, just as the bell rang for the end of the period. He hadn't been spending much time with Hedwig at all. In fact he had been spending no time with her, so she had sought him out.

The moving staircases were full of students as Harry came to them and it took several minutes negotiation to get a few floors up. All other students on the staircase shot him awe filled looks as he passed them. Hedwig hooted peacefully near his ear as they went and the portraits around the tower stared at him. Not all cast friendly glances, though. A few seventh year Slytherins he passed practically spat venom at him, but had enough sense not to provoke him. Harry sighed as he watched the most likely future Death Eaters walk down the stairs as he walked up.

Harry got off the stairs at a floor below the one he needed to be on to get to the common room. It would take about ten minutes to get a staircase up there and it would be quicker to use the unmoving one around the corner on this floor. So once again jostling through the crowds with Hedwig on his shoulder, Harry headed down this corridor.

If Harry had remembered anything of his old timetable, he would have

remembered that the sixth years had just had Defence Against the Dark Arts. And if he had really thought about it, he would have realised that coming this way would have put him on a collision course for-

"Potter," spat Draco Malfoy as Harry rounded a corner and stopped as the sixth year Slytherins, Ravenclaws, and Hufflepuffs appeared in front of him. Malfoy was, of course, leading the Slytherins to wherever they were going, and was at the front of the group.

"Malfoy," Harry said just as coldly, and then made to walk passed the git, not wanting to get into a fight with the Slytherin.

"Not so fast, Potter," Malfoy smirked, and despite himself Harry stopped. Every other student in the corridor had stopped as well. A Potter/Malfoy fight was always something to see. Harry briefly noticed that there were no Gryffindors in the crowd and he realised a moment later that it would have been because they all would have gone the opposite direction, up the staircase he had been trying to get to.

"I'm not in the mood, Malfoy," Harry said with a slight edge to his voice, as Hedwig ruffled her feathers on his shoulder, sensing Harry's feelings. A slight circle had formed around them now, as some decided to leave or stay and watch. There were people from other years in the crowd now.

Malfoy ignored Harry. "Heard you were at Hogsmeade yesterday, Potter?" he said airily, knowing full well that Harry had been there.

"What of it?" Harry replied, not missing a beat. His palm was tingling with magic. "Your Dad wasn't there, if that's what you're after? He was broken out of Azkaban *after* the attack."

Harry saw with a mild satisfaction that Malfoy was furious at that comment and the Slytherins behind him growled menacingly. "Be careful, Potter..." Malfoy whispered, the corridor was silent so everybody heard him. The only other sound was a low humming from Hedwig that Harry thought must have been anger.

Now, had Malfoy threatened him like that a year ago, Harry might have felt slightly worried, though he'd never show it. But too much had happened since Sirius' death for him to care what Draco Malfoy said or

did. So Harry took a few steps forward towards the Slytherin as whispers broke out among the crowd. Malfoy, thinking Harry was going to attack drew his wand, but Harry didn't.

"Or else what, Malfoy?" Harry scoffed, as Hedwig bristled on his shoulder. "You really think you and your gang here can intimidate me?" Harry waved vaguely at the dozen or so Slytherins behind the smirking git. "I duelled with Voldemort yesterday and held my own. Look at you, you flinch at his name... you're not even worth my time," Harry ended with a whisper. He no longer suffered fools easily and was a lot more satisfied with the look on Malfoy's face this time.

The crowd began to disperse, obviously not going to see what they thought. That was until, Malfoy fired a hex at Harry's back.

Harry sensed it coming a moment before it actually did. He instinctively ducked and a jet of red light flew over his right shoulder and Hedwig hooted shrilly. The curse missed and hit a suit of armour, which promptly fell to pieces. Harry was up in a flash and turned around with cold fury in his eyes. He had been in the line of enough curses over the years to know that that one wasn't meant for him, it had been aimed at Hedwig.

With an angry growl Harry raised his arm and Malfoy was thrown back against the wall just as surely as if he had been hit. He hit the wall hard but Harry couldn't care less. Hedwig flapped her wings with surprise as she felt the wave of power come from her owner. A gasp had resounded through the crowd as no one had ever seen such wandless magic. Malfoy glared down at Harry but that was all he could do, he was suspended against the wall.

Harry was now the one with the furious look on his face. So furious that the other Slytherin's didn't even move to help Malfoy. "Of all the dirty..." Harry began, keeping his hand raised and Malfoy pinned to the wall. That curse may have killed Hedwig. "You coward," Harry said icily and moved his arm back and forth once so that Malfoy was thrown back against the wall again.

"HARRY!" shouted a familiar voice but Harry ignored it, throwing Malfoy against the wall once more. "What are you doing?" cried Hermione, running forward and putting a hand on his shoulder. Ron and Ginny were

right behind her. Apparently word of their conflict had spread fast for even Hogwarts's standards.

At the sight of Malfoy a grin spread across Ron's face and Ginny couldn't help but smile a little. A few other Gryffindors also made their presence known and Seamus was laughing with Dean as the two of them appeared.

"Let me down, Potter..." Malfoy said with a strain. He was looking daggers at Harry.

Harry scowled and for the moment ignored Hermione, then with his other hand whispered a small spell and the arms of Malfoy's robes rose, revealing his bare arms. Harry's eyes briefly flew over the forearms and then after a brief second Harry let the Slytherin fall to the ground hard.

"Not marked yet, Malfoy?" Harry asked, his eyebrows raised. "I'm sure if you just owl your Dad..." Harry reached up and stroked Hedwig. "He'll grovel at Voldemort's feet and ask for him to brand you."

Harry turned away and, giving a sly grin to his friends, headed back to the common room finally, the other Gryffindors following.

"That was brilliant, Harry," Ron smiled, clasping Harry on his Hedwig-free shoulder as they sat down in the armchairs by the fire. Harry rubbed his sore bandaged hand as he stared into the flames.

"It did feel good," he smiled after a long minute. "So how is everyone?" he asked, turning to look at Ron, Hermione, and Neville. His eyes briefly passed over Ginny's but he didn't keep them there long.

Hermione seemed to have gotten over Harry's breaking of the rules and was now staring at him carefully, worriedly. "How are *you*, Harry?" she asked pointedly. "We heard about Hogsmeade..."

"Who didn't?" Harry smiled sadly. "I'm all right," he eventually said with a sigh. "I've got to get use to it sooner or later...."

"I don't think a person is meant to get used to that..." Ginny whispered.

Harry just blinked and then turned to look back in the fire. "Missed

Quidditch practice last night then?" He changed the subject.

Ron chuckled. "Didn't have it. We were told to stay in the common room from five o'clock onwards. Had dinner up here and everything..."

Hedwig was sitting on the arm of the chair, warming herself by the fire as Harry stroked her neck. "I did get some good things done in Hogsmeade, though," Harry said. "Went to the armourer's. Bloke named Elendil is going to outfit the DA."

"With dragon armour!" Ron said unbelievably. "That'll cost..."

"About a hundred thousand galleons," Harry cut in. "That is," he frowned. "If Marcus is still alive? Anyone got a quill and parchment?"

"Here you go," Neville said, pulling ink and a quill from his bag as Hermione gave him a bit of parchment. "Up to a trip, girl?" Harry asked Hedwig as he wrote a small note to Marcus Elendil. Hedwig hooted excitedly, obviously happy that she was finally being given a job.

After writing the letter Harry attached it to her leg and she was gone almost instantly, out the nearby open window. "Come back safely," Harry called after her and then turned back to his friends. "Do any of you know where my chest armour went?" he asked.

"It's up on your bed," Ron said, cuddling in close next to Hermione, one arm over her shoulder. "Pomfrey took it off yesterday to get to your broken ribs..."

Harry nodded and a shadow passed over his face as he remembered the pain that had been yesterday. So much had already happened since then. Animagus for one, but the fight was still fresh in his mind. "I truly hate Voldemort," Harry said sadly, more to himself than to any of his friends. They all heard him, though, but none could think of anything to say.

Later that evening Harry barely touched his dinner in the Great Hall, as he felt a scar headache coming on. Which usually meant it would take hours to fall asleep and then hours of nightmares in what little sleep there would be. Also he was annoyed at all the looks and quick glances he was attracting from around the Hall, a lot of them from Dumbledore

and the staff.

So it was with a throbbing headache that Harry finally lay down to bed that night, just after ten. His thoughts were dark as the exhaustion that came with his life finally enveloped him into sleep and the nightmares claimed him.

"We can't keep up with this, Albus," Arthur Weasley said exasperatedly, from the floo in the office of the Minister of Magic.

"We must try, Arthur," Dumbledore said strongly, belying the century old weariness he felt. "What of France?"

Arthur thought for a moment. "Twenty five Aurors, several fresh out of the Academy, but any is a help. But word is that another *fifty* rejoined him today after he has shown his true power. Many that weren't sure whether they should before... He is a lot stronger than his first war."

Albus sighed in his mind but kept his face strong and hopeful to those in his care. "It isn't all that bad, Arthur. Continue to train as many Aurors as you can. I fear we are going to need them sooner rather than later. I will call a meeting of the International Confederation in the morning and position to the world the real threat of Voldemort. Australia will help, if no one else will..."

"Very well, Albus. I'll see you soon. Perhaps you could come to dinner Saturday evening? Molly's making one of her roasts." Arthur smiled genuinely.

"Indeed. I will be there my friend. Goodnight." Arthur Weasley's head disappeared from the fireplace and Dumbledore walked slowly back over to his ancient desk and sat down heavily in his chair. Fawkes sang soothingly but not even that could help Dumbledore anymore.

As much as he tried to appear strong to the world, the weight of all those who had died under him had been slowly chipping away at his defence walls for decades, ever since the first friend he had lost to Grindelwald. "They never blame me, Fawkes," Dumbledore mused and the phoenix once again cried. "I use them as if they were chess pieces... and still...."

Dumbledore sighed and opened the top draw of his desk. After a moments rummaging he flicked his hand slightly and a black object flew out of the draw and onto his lap. It was a photo album. An album that held more pictures than Albus cared to remember. It was at times like this and only times like this that Albus opened it. When the darkness was growing he needed to remind himself that it was worth it.

Dumbledore opened the album carelessly, to any page. It was strangely ironic that the page he opened it to held the photo of Lily and James Potter. He had tried so hard to protect them... The two of them looked up at him knowingly from the photo and Albus felt a heart breaking loyalty to protect Harry until the end. He turned the page slowly and the picture of Frank and Alice Longbottom are the ones now smiling knowingly. It is *their* undeniable loyalty that makes Dumbledore think he should never have outlived them all. Turning back two pages he sees the Prewett's, more of his pawns sacrificed to save another or to win a victory over the darkness.

Some victories come at too high of a price

"Still mourning over the inevitable, Albus?" a voice from one of the many paintings in the room whispers.

"Indeed, Phineas. Someone must," the Headmaster croaked, turning to another page of lost friends. Many from the first Order reside as memories in his album.

Phineas sensed Dumbledore's distress. He had been on this wall for decades and had been an advisor to Dumbledore on many occasions. He would do that until the castle walls fell around him. "Death is not everything, Dumbledore. It is crueler not to be able to die."

"I wish I could feel that way, Phineas... Alas, some measure of blame must be placed on me for so many lost." Albus turned the page again and this time it opened to the latest entry into his album, Sirius.

"War has come for the children, Albus. Will you be adding yet more to that book of yours?" Phineas wearily managed, with a sigh.

Dumbledore sighed as well. *So many forgotten faces.* "More than I care

to think..." he whispered.

"One cannot so easily sacrifice his pieces, if he sees that they possess a soul. That they are in fact alive..."

Dumbledore continued to turn pages of his album, not responding to Phineas' last comment. It held truth. After a long moment in which many old faces smiled warmly up at their headmaster, Albus spoke again.

"I hold a... coldness in me, Phineas," he began tiredly, Fawkes soothing him slightly with a low note. "For every life that has ever been spent for my cause. I remember them all as children... They died so quickly for what is right, I sent some of them to their deaths. And after they're gone I remember..." Dumbledore's eyes looked across his desk and into the past of years gone by. "I remember that that person actually *lived* that life and died for my cause."

"It *was* their cause as well, Headmaster," Phineas replied. "And life is not worth living if you cannot find something to die for..."

How many times has that rung true? Dumbledore wondered. His thoughts strayed to the current members of the Order and the last of the true Marauders, Remus Lupin... and then, as they had a way of doing, to Harry. What mistakes had he made in the past that now forced the boy to carry so many burdens? What mistakes have forced his magic to become so strong, for good or ill...?

"You may not want war, Albus, but war will want you until Riddle is gone," Phineas continued, throwing Dumbledore into a new range of thoughts and a whole new range of mistakes.

"No matter what happens, Phineas," Albus whispered, placing a hand on the photo in front of him, Sirius, "I will always feel that they were too young to die...."

Phineas smiled and laughed sadly. "You will always feel that way, seeing as you're the oldest person fighting in this war."

Dumbledore didn't smile as he replaced his old photo album, which still had too many empty leafs in it. "Do you think we will ever have our 'glorious' victory, Phineas?" Dumbledore questioned the previous

Headmaster.

"There are no glorious victories, Albus, not when one has seen the battlefield after the fight. War is just a series of catastrophes that end in loss... that is the tragedy."

Dumbledore stood up from his desk, deciding to retire to his quarters for the night. He still carried the weight of the dead on his shoulders, though. "A Muggle once said that the tragedy of war is that it uses man's best to do man's worst... Harry possesses a courage beyond that, though, Phineas, and that is why he will win us our victory."

"You place all our hopes with a child. But will he live to savour that victory, I wonder?"

Albus did not answer Phineas' final comment, as the door to his quarters closed painfully behind him.

Harry woke early, as was his way, the next morning. The pain in his scar had receded but his sleep had been plagued with nightmares of the dead. He showered early before any of his dorm mates and was dressed and downstairs by five o'clock. He also had his dragon armour back on.

The day was relatively normal, as normal as it could be these days anyway. Harry went down to the Entrance Hall and trained with Siamus Scrapfold and Dernas. Neither mentioned what had happened in Hogsmeade and Harry didn't start the conversation. He had breakfast with his friends and then it was sword training with Dernas. After that he had curse training with Thomas Fright, Charms and Healing with Grace Arnair, and finally Magical Tuning with Rose Appleton.

Rose was very impressed with his progress in thought magic, as he was learning at a level that would soon surpass her. Harry also impressed Grace in Healing as he healed his cut ridden hand and was left with only a few scars. She was impressed because he did it without a wand.

At lunch Ron and Hermione were no where to be found so Harry spent it with Neville and Ginny. Ginny seemed slightly uncomfortable around him but Neville was happy to discuss his latest plant acquisition. After

lunch Harry had some brief sword training with the wooden sticks down by the lake, and it was at this time that Hedwig finally reappeared and she was carrying a note from someone.

Mr. Potter,

Thank you for your concern. I am indeed still alive and will be more than happy to fill your order in two weeks time, which is Sunday February 18th. I have had to relocate to our Diagon Alley branch owing to the unfortunate events that occurred two days ago, but you know all about that of course.

The rest of your armour will be delivered by this Sunday after a thorough restoration and magical cleaning. Thank you again for your business and I will see you soon,

Marcus Elendil

Harry sighed with relief. It was good to know that Marcus was alive. He thanked Hedwig and then she flew off, presumably to the owlery.

"Had enough for today, Harry?" asked Dermal.

Harry nodded. "Not getting my knuckles rubbed raw anymore, though," he smiled. It was true, he had progressed rather well with the wooden sticks and could now hold Trask off almost completely. He still couldn't deliver a blow of his own, though.

"Aye, that's true," agreed Trask, smiling. "Not the incompetent little runt I met a month ago."

After Harry said goodbye to Dermal he made his way up to the Room of Requirement. As soon as he could he was back up in the air as a griffin, soaring with the wind through the sky. Yesterday he had been slightly nervous when doing this but now it was second nature, it was fun. It was still several hours until classes finished for that day, at least for Ron and Hermione anyway. They finished at four but he knew Ginny had the afternoon free because Moody had to go away for a bit, something for the Order, but he wasn't sure he actually wanted to see her, alone. Harry felt as if he was getting too close to her, emotionally.

Ron and Hermione had told him that they were going to Hagrid's at five so they could have tea there and they could show him the griffin. Harry hadn't told them about his transformation as once again he had been put in the bind of keeping secrets from his friends or placing them in further danger. The secret had, obviously, won out in the end.

He thought it was going to be a hassle free evening that night, but sadly that was not meant to be, as Harry found out just on the moment he landed as a griffin. Harry was immediately forced out of his form as white hot pain ripped through his forehead, his scar was on fire. He fell to the ground, clutching his forehead as the world grew black around him.

Harry was in the body of a monster. He was once again sharing a mind with the one creature he detested above all else. He saw the world through Voldemort's mind... and it wasn't pretty.

A man writhed in pain on the floor in front of Harry, he had his wand trained on him as he screamed. Harry watched helplessly as Voldemort tortured this poor man, whoever he was, while a dozen Death Eaters laughed and shot curses of their own into the man.

Harry could see that they were in someone's home, presumably the man's. It was a dining room of some sort, a large room and it was definitely a wizarding family, as some of the portraits on the walls were moving and protesting to the torture. Several of them were already alight in deep purple flames.

Harry turned back to the man as Voldemort broke the connection of the cruciatus. Whoever he was he remained slumped over and struggled to stand only slightly once the pain had gone. He coughed up some blood onto the rug on which he lay.

It was then that Voldemort spoke, but to Harry it felt as if he did as well.

"You insult your blood, Gosteuax. You are a disgrace to wizard kind and a falsity upon this earth."

The man cried and moaned in response.

"And for these crimes your filthy Mudblood wife will pay... Lucius," Voldemort/Harry said sadistically.

A Death Eater who had been standing behind the Dark Lord, so Harry couldn't have seen him, stepped forward. Harry could tell it was Lucius Malfoy and he knew the woman he was levitating in front of him unconscious was the poor man's wife.

Gosteux, the man, looked up as Voldemort spoke and actually tried to move as he saw his wife thrown to the floor in front of him. "You are not worthy of magic," Voldemort said, pure disgust and evil in his merciless words.

And with that, he revived the woman and the Death Eaters did what they did. She awoke and was immediately confused, lost in thought until her eyes connected with Voldemort's. She would have screamed at that sight but never had the chance. The dozen or so Death Eaters began to torture her, while her husband watched helplessly.

She was levitated into the air, already under multiple cruciatus as her nerves were ripped from their sockets and a thousand knives stabbed into her body. Her screams pierced the room that was on fire in several places and Voldemort and the Death Eaters merely laughed as her body was mutilated and destroyed.

The man in the centre of it all cried out for his wife from the floor beneath her with his eyes. He was in a body bind and could only watch the horror that was Voldemort. Harry cried for it to stop and fought desperately for control of Voldemort's mind, as he had done his back in the Ministry, but he couldn't do it. The woman continued to scream as a dozen separate spells ripped her limbs and bones from her body, and transfigured her into an unrecognisable lump, her blood now falling down onto her grief stricken husband.

It was over.

Harry tried to close his mind off from the scene, rip it away from the mutilation. It was impossible, he would have to see it out until the end. With a final flick of his wand Lucius Malfoy sent what was left of the poor woman over into the growing flames at the far end of the dining room, whilst Voldemort released her husband from the body bind.

The second he was released the man cried out, an unearthly scream

that was only met with laughs from those present. Lucius Malfoy and the Lestranges took extreme pleasure in seeing how anguished the man was. But none so more than Voldemort.

"You see the price of your betrayal, Gosteuax?" Voldemort whispered as the man before him shook with shock and terror. "But your family history is noble, and Lord Voldemort does not forget. Swear your allegiance to me and all is forgiven."

It was the man's turn to laugh now and he did so manically. He laughed for a full ten seconds before speaking seriously. "Never..." he whispered. "You will fall."

Voldemort hadn't actually thought that the man would join him. He was, after all, a traitor to his blood. He would be an example to all purebloods who had married anything less. Oh well. "AVADA KEDAVRA!"

The man fell dead and Harry fell back into his body.

Stark, unforgiving, unrelenting reality forced its way into Harry's consciousness as he woke in the Room of Requirement and promptly threw up his lunch. He shook uncontrollably for a moment before getting a hold of himself. He had to tell Dumbledore.

The trip to the Headmaster's office seemed to take hours. He met no one on the way and had to stop several times as he went dizzy. When he finally arrived he forced his brain to remember the password and then with an effort he climbed the well trodden steps.

Dumbledore was, of course, seated behind his desk. He had just returned from the meeting with the International Confederation of Wizards, and things didn't go as well as he had hoped. The world didn't want to see Voldemort as a threat, didn't want to handle yet another Dark Lord rising, when each country already had their own band of dark wizards to deal with. But none of them had to deal with anything on the scale of Voldemort. While they used their Aurors to track down criminals and cult wizards, Britains Aurors were dying viciously.

Though it hadn't been a complete waste of time, Dumbledore thought

with reflection. Sixty seven Aurors from Australia and twenty three from America. It wasn't enough, it would never be enough, but it was a start.

Dumbledore had just finished a floo call to Arthur at the Ministry. Fifteen new recruits began their training today, only five at best would make it through to become a full Auror. There just weren't enough numbers, weren't enough willing to risk their lives and fight. Fear had once again settled over the country like a blanket of snow.

It was at this moment that the door to his office opened and in walked a very distraught looking Harry.

"Harry!" Dumbledore said quickly, rising from his chair as Harry stumbled forward. "What has happened?"

Harry took a few weary steps, he was exhausted. "Scar... He killed... Gosteaux." Harry collapsed into the chair in front of the desk, a solitary tear falling down his cheek. He swiped it away angrily.

Dumbledore sat back down and gave Harry a moment. He was just about to speak but Harry did first. "I... fell into another vision," he began.

Dumbledore listened attentively and with a growing horror as Harry described the events he had witnessed. It had happened so many times before, of course, but one never did get used to it. No doubt it would happen again before the end. Albus could tell that this one had really affected Harry. It had come too soon after everything else, after he had had to kill in Hogsmeade for one.

When Harry finished Dumbledore could tell he was tired and very exhausted. He had known the Gosteaux family of course, they were two of his most loyal supporters and he had seen them last only this morning at the Confederation meeting. It was just another photo of those lost he now had to add to his album. The portraits of all the previous Headmasters all listened silently.

"Thank you for telling me, Harry," Dumbledore said affectionately, once again wearing his façade. He needed to appear strong. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm tired..." Harry mumbled absently, staring at a corner of the desk. "So

tired..."

"I expect you are, dear boy." Dumbledore fell silent for a moment. "I cannot help you forget, Harry," he said after a long moment. "We all have our personal demons... you more than most. To not give up hope just yet, Harry."

"It's getting so hard," Harry whispered.

"We are not lost," Dumbledore met Harry's eyes and then tried to take the conversation into a more friendly subject. "I hear you have become an animagus?"

Harry smiled sadly. "Not through choice... It just happened."

"Useful none the less. I expect flying is quite an experience," Dumbledore's eyes twinkled and Harry felt an unexpected feeling of reassurance.

Harry nodded and then rose from his chair. He needed to go and think, to sort out his morals and emotions. "Goodbye, Professor," he said quietly and then turned towards the door without another word.

"Do not keep the pain to yourself, Harry," Dumbledore had risen again and was around his desk quickly to stop Harry before he left. He placed a hand on Harry's shoulder and gently turned him around. He had unshed tears held in his eyes, behind the glasses. "Talk to your friends, they love you and would be more than willing to listen."

Harry nodded automatically but more than a century on this earth had taught Dumbledore enough about human reactions to know that he wouldn't worry his friends. Selflessness could also be a burden. He would keep his feelings to himself, lest it hurt someone else.

Albus said no more as Harry turned and once again made for the door. He was gone a moment later but Dumbledore felt his heart wrench as he heard him crying on the staircase just outside the door. It was only for a second and it faded away to nothing as quickly as it had come, but it had cut straight through the old Headmaster. Everything was falling slowly apart....

"Our hope is breaking, Albus," Phineas Nigellus managed solemnly from his portrait. "There is always a limit to what a man can take... and that boy should have broken a long time ago."

Harry walked without a destination in mind. He walked simply because it was an action, something to take him to the next second of his existence. Just one foot in front of the other and he carried on living. He had promised himself not to cry, not until his job was done... but there were so many conflicting emotions, all battling for dominance and despair was winning.

Harry turned when he heard footsteps behind him but the corridor was empty. *Imagining things* he thought and carried on walking. His feet took him all the way to the Astronomy tower and without really thinking about it Harry began to climb up the tower, his mind flicking back to images of the dead as he went.

It being four o'clock in the afternoon there were no classes out on the observation deck at the top of the tower. It was empty and would be until midnight at least. Harry walked over to the very edge of the deck and looked down at the ground far below. Carelessly he pulled himself over and sat down on the wall, his legs dangling down precariously towards the ground so far away.

He was sitting on arguably the highest point of the whole castle, it was higher than any of the other turrets and there was a clear line of sight out over the grounds and across the forest. Hogsmeade could be seen slightly in the distance and the mountain behind it, that seemingly guarded over the graveyard at its roots, stood tall and proud as ever.

The sky was streaked a marvellous orange as the winter sun fell behind the mountain and Harry sadly watched a group of students walking back up towards the castle from Care of Magical Creatures. He could see the griffin in its enclosure from where he sat, and could also make out Hagrid entering his cabin.

Harry sniffed and ran a hand through his hair, looking up into the sky. He was silent but his mind was screaming 'why?' Why did he have to see

these things, see humanity at its worst? What force in this universe decided that he would have to fight? Why wasn't he given a choice? He sure as hell wouldn't have chosen this if he had been....

His mind flicked to Voldemort and an all consuming hatred filled his heart. Harry truly felt at that moment that he may lose it, that his anger would finally win out. His magic crackled over his skin and his eye's glowed with a green fire. *You bastard* he thought. *God I'm going to kill you...*

Harry felt a few stubborn tears making their way down his face but he didn't try to push them away this time. He stood up on the wall, right on the edge and watched the world around him, feeling himself calm a little as the wind blew through his hair. But his mind wouldn't relent. His morals wouldn't let him forget what he saw, not yet anyway.

With a thought Harry brought Gryffindor's sword out from within him and held it tightly in his left hand. His mind was doing a mile a minute and a desire stronger than anything he had ever felt before came over him. It was the desire to kill. To kill or be killed. He wanted nothing more from the world than to kill Voldemort. And as the sun slowly sunk behind the distant mountain Harry made a promise that would stay with him for however long he lived.

He switched the sword into his right hand and then with a quick flick, passed his palm of his left hand across the point of the blade, drawing a long cut. It was a blood promise. Blood had resurrected him, and now Harry swore on the same blood that he would kill Voldemort.

"No matter what," Harry said solemnly, tears falling down his cheeks. "No matter what happens I will see you dead." The blood from his cut hand dripped slowly to the floor, solidifying his promise, his oath. Harry felt a small tingle in his scar as he said this, and a sudden, unexpected stab of pain ripped across it. Harry fell to one knee and raised his hand to his forehead. Gryffindor's sword returned to it's resting place, just out of sight. Another stab made him fall to both his knees and he almost fell off the wall. At the same moment he closed his eyes against the pain, a snake like venomous voice filled every corner of his mind. It was *him*.

We shall see, Potter...

The pain vanished instantly and Harry felt his mind returning to him, felt the demon withdrawing. He opened his eyes and still found himself kneeling so close to the edge on top of the Astronomy tower, the vast expanse of the cold world around him. For a moment he questioned what had just happened. It seemed that Voldemort had heard, or at least felt, the promise he had just made. Harry smiled grimly at this. *Good* he thought, *I'll let him brood over that...* Harry stared out into space for a moment, his resolve to kill Voldemort absolute. He was about to move when he heard a voice behind him.

"Harry..." said a familiar voice filled with nothing but concern. "Harry, are you okay...?"

Harry recognised the voice instantly and sighed. "As well as I'll ever be, Ginny," he said without turning around. "How long have you been standing there?"

There was a long quiet moment before she answered. "I followed you up here... I heard everything you said."

Harry stood up now and turned to face her, she looked scared. Her hair was flying around her shoulders untamed and her brown eyes held tears. He stepped down off the wall but as he did so he realised his hand was still bleeding. With a frown he looked down at it for a moment and then with his other hand conjured a thick bandage to wrap around the cut. He could have healed it magically but this was one scar he wanted to keep.

"Why did you follow me, Ginny?" he asked a moment later, staring into her eyes.

Ginny blinked and looked away, out over to the forest. "I... I have some things to tell you..." she whispered, her hands playing with the cuff of her robes. "But I think now isn't the best time anymore..." she sighed and then finally met his eyes again.

"No," Harry said quickly and took a few steps forward so he was standing right in front of her. "Tell me..."

Ginny opened her mouth to speak but no words came out and she just looked down and shook her head slightly. After a moment she looked

back up into Harry's face. She saw the streaks from the tears that he kept so well hidden. Behind his glasses his emerald green eyes searched her deeply. Her eye's flew over the lightning bolt shaped scar, it had a dab of blood at its base, and then across the faint scar lines on his cheek, from Christmas when he had been hit by all that shrapnel.

Ginny took a deep, shuddering breathe and then just threw all caution to the wind. Harry was standing so close and she rose on her tip toes and before he could move she pushed her lips against his.

Harry's sparkling eyes widened in shock for a moment as he realised a moment too late what Ginny was about to do. Time slowed almost to a stop as Harry looked deep into Ginny's face. She had her eyes closed and her nose lightly touched the side of his cheek. He felt the pressure of her lips and a warm feeling seemed to surge right through him from the point of contact.

In one fantastic moment a hundred happy feelings flew through him and he forgot all the pain and the sorrow of the world. It was moment's like this, those brief instances in life that made all the death worth it. One of these moments was worth a lifetime of pain. Time sped up again and Harry found himself responding to the kiss.

Harry opened his mouth slightly and raised his hands to put them on her shoulders. He pulled her closer and after a moment their tongues met and Harry was well and truly lost in the kiss. Their tongues danced and a silent tear fell from the corner of Ginny's eye. It was perfect.

And then it was over.

Harry pulled away slightly and Ginny did the same. He could still taste her on his bottom lip as slowly, ever so slowly they both opened their eyes. Emerald green met love filled brown. Both of them had tears in their eyes and a moment later Harry pulled Ginny close to him in a tight embrace. She in turn wrapped her arms around him and they just held each other in one blissful moment of memory.

Ginny felt so fragile in his arms and Harry closed his eyes as she rested her head on his shoulder. It may have been minutes or hours but when Harry opened his eyes again he saw Ginny looking back up at him. She

looked so beautiful in the failing light as a few beams of sunlight played with the loose strands of her hair. She laughed slightly and raised her lips again and Harry lowered his to meet her-

NO! In one catastrophic moment of realisation the feeling of happiness Harry had felt evaporated as reality crashed down upon him, like an avalanche. It couldn't happen, it shouldn't happen... Too many lost already. The danger was too great. He loved her, he realised that now. And she loved him, but it couldn't be... If he loved her he wouldn't let her come to harm, and that meant....

"Ginny..." he managed and she stopped moving towards his lips as she saw the absolutely heartbreaking look in his eyes. "Ginny... we can't..."

"Harry...?" she said slowly, falling out of their embrace and standing up properly. "What...?"

Harry cursed the unfairness of the world. "We can't..." They were the hardest words he had ever had to say. "He'll find out... He'll come for you..."

A tear fell unchecked down her face. "I don't care, Harry," she said quickly. "I... I love you," she ended so quietly Harry barely heard it.

"And I love you to," he said shakily. "That's why this can't happen... not until..." Harry ran a frustrated hand through his hair and turned away angrily. Ginny threw out her hand and tried to grasp his but only succeeded in pulling the ring from his finger, the ring she had given him.

Harry turned back to look at her and saw the pain she was feeling on her face. He hated himself for causing that. *But it is better this way* he told himself, *isn't it...?*

"I don't care about that, Harry," Ginny whispered, holding the ring as if it was something extremely precious. It was to her... and to Harry. "You're all I care about. To hell with V-Voldemort...."

"He'll get you," Harry said without any doubt in his voice. "I can't protect you from him. We can't do this...."

"Harry-" Ginny said quickly taking a step towards him.

"No," he cut in quickly, stepping back over to the wall and raising his hand slightly. Instantly an invisible barrier appeared in between the two of them. Ginny tried to step forward again but found it impossible. "I'm sorry, Ginny," Harry whispered, an amazing sincerity in his voice. "I'm truly sorry."

"We can work it out," she cried, more tears falling. Harry mentally kicked himself for having to be so cold. Ginny made an effort to get close again but the magical barrier was impassable. She let out a frustrated sigh.

Harry felt it all becoming too much again. He wanted this, he wanted it so much... but if he took it, then it would fall apart like everything else in the world was. If she was killed he had absolutely no idea what would happen to him. So as the grief mixed with the happiness and Harry cried slightly, he saw his way out.

"We will work this out, Ginny," he said solemnly, from his side of the invisible barrier. "But not now..."

And with that Harry turned around, stepping up onto the wall of the observation desk and one fearless moment later, he jumped off. Ginny screamed and her heart skipped a few beats as fear took her. She made to move forward again but the barrier still prevented that. A cry escaped her lips as Harry disappeared from sight and all grew quiet.

Ginny couldn't believe it, it was impossible. And then the impossible happened again. A gust of wind flew up from the ledge and hit her in the face softly. It was followed by a loud screech and then a massive creature flew passed her vision and further up into the sky.

Harry jumped, his anguish now complete. He knew deep down that he was doing what was right, but did it always have to hurt so much...? Barely two seconds after he jumped Harry pushed his head forward and flipped in the air. Halfway through the roll he tapped into his consciousness and drew out the griffin within him.

An instant later Harry spread his wings and with a smooth flap pushed the wind aerodynamically behind him, giving him lift. He rose quickly and

a moment later he saw Ginny standing alone out of the corner of his eye. He continued to rise and then straightened his wings so he glided around gracefully in his arc, his eyes connecting with Ginny's below. She had a look of utter amazement on her face.

In his mind Harry sighed and then with a final look at the girl he now knew he loved, he turned away and cried out sadly into the night air.

Ginny couldn't believe it. Harry was an Animagus! When... how... A thousand questions flew through her mind, making her forget the time stopping kiss of a moment ago as she watched him fly down and from sight. It was incredible, it was unbelievable, it hurt so much.

She touched her bottom lip with her fingers and sniffed slightly, her other hand grasping the ring she had accidentally pulled from his finger. *I won't give up* she thought strongly. *He said he loved me... I knew it...*

He hadn't rejected her. No... the look in his eyes. He had been desperate for comfort, but his selflessness, his need to protect had denied him the comfort he craved. Ginny would have to overcome that, if she was to have any chance.

She turned away slowly, and headed back down the tower. Her face was a storm of pure emotion as she joined the crowds of students heading back to their common rooms. Lessons for that day had ended.

Harry soared down hard towards the ground, he passed the numerous towers, turrets, and windows of the castle. He flew with the wind and it took only ten seconds to reach the forest, which he glided over gracefully, his paws only just skimming the tops of the tallest trees.

He arced around and flew back the direction he came and finally landed on the grounds at the edge of the forest, near the lake. In the blink of an eye he transformed back into a human and looked back up at the astronomy tower. The observation deck was too high for him to see clearly and after a minute he turned away. Right now Harry didn't care if anyone had seen him transform, Voldemort would find out sooner or

later, and he had bigger things to worry about than that now.

Harry had a lot to think about, almost too much. Just an hour ago he had been on the brink. He had been ultimately depressed.... And then Ginny had come along and taken all of that away. He had felt happiness, he had felt love after so many cold months. He looked down at his hand and saw the recent cut had bled through the bandage. He waved his hand and a clean one appeared.

A brief glance at his watch told him it was coming up five. It was tea at Hagrid's come five, so that was where he headed now. One thought pierced his troubled mind, though, as he walked away from the bank of the lake. It was a thought that made him smile and at the same time tore him in two....

He loved Ginny Weasley, and she loved him in return... but a Dark Lord and the battlefield of war stood between them being happy.

It left Harry with an impossible decision made by impossible circumstances. It wasn't fair, but his life rarely was.

Chapter 26 - Some Wounds Cut Too Deep

*We are, each of us angels with only one wing;
and we can only fly by embracing one another.*

-- Luciano de Crescenzo

Harry ambled over the small rise in the ground and Hagrid's cabin came into view. It was getting dark now and he wanted to talk to his friends. Some things needed to be discussed.

He saw the griffin and the chimera in their respective paddocks as he walked by. The chimera ignored him totally but the griffin seemed to appraise him and he swore that when he nodded it nodded back. Harry

came to Hagrid's door and knocked hard. He heard the shuffling of the half giant inside and Harry took this moment to think about recent developments.

"I don't care about that, Harry," Ginny whispered, holding the ring as if it was something extremely precious. It was to her... and to Harry. "You're all I care about. To hell with V-Voldemort...."

Harry sighed. *It wasn't that easy... was it?* He was torn. On one hand was happiness with Ginny. Happiness he desperately needed, he desperately craved. On the other was the threat of the Dark Lord. *An impossible choice.* Be happy... or risk it all for that feeling. If Harry knew Ginny, which he did more than most people thought, she wouldn't give up easily. He admired that. It was one of the reasons he had admitted his love to her up on the tower.

Love he thought amazingly. How had it happened...? One minute he was so close to the edge, tiptoeing on the line between sanity and madness, and the next he was holding Ginny in his arms for dear life. It didn't make sense... but these things rarely did. Love was one of the emotions Harry had very little experience in. Growing up in its place he had contempt and bitterness. Nothing even resembling love. It was a relatively new emotion for him, but one he had unknowingly craved.

And to express that to Ginny. GINNY! The rest of the world may be closing in around him as the prophecy and war ruled his life almost every hour of every day, but she had been his relief. One brief moment on top of the Astronomy tower as the sun was setting in the distance. *It had been perfect* he thought, biting his bottom lip as he remembered Ginny's being there.

But where had the feelings come from? This was the one thought that Harry was stumped on. It had just happened. It had just happened as if it was the most natural thing in the world. It was like getting doused in cold water, a wake up. The past five years it had been growing, growing from her possession by Riddle. But the emotion had always been suppressed by unforeseen circumstances. Too much had happened, he had, effectively, ignored her. Yet she was always there, a calming presence in the background. They had so much in common. They understood

each other almost perfectly.

He and Ginny had been friends until her fourth year, Harry's fifth year. Then their friendship had started to become something more. It was more deep... she was with him at Christmas when his world was once again falling apart, she was there in the DA, she was there at the Department of Mysteries. She was always there, and love had been growing. They had become closer last year, and it had just hit Harry how close up on the Astronomy tower. More than he ever thought could be possible, for him anyway. They both had realised it, Ginny first... and from there it had just happened.

Technically it had been a slow process. It had taken years for the feelings to develop for him. But the feeling itself, love, had hit him hard and fast in one amazing instant up on the heights of the castle only minutes ago... and he was still reeling from the blow.

"Arry," smiled Hagrid as he opened the door to his cabin. "Yer early."

Harry smiled slightly. "Didn't have to worry too much about training today," he replied and entered the cabin. "Hello, Fang." The great dog jumped up happily to greet Harry.

"Ron and Hermione no' with yer?" asked Harry.

"No..." Harry said absently, thinking back to Ginny. "They'll probably be down in a minute, though. It's almost five."

"Aye," agreed Hagrid, busying himself with the teapot. "How are you, Harry?" he asked as Harry sat himself at the table.

Confused, angry, upset, in love, miserable...? "I'm fine, Hagrid."

"I 'spect yer are, Harry. Takes a lot ter get yer down..." Hagrid filled two cups with tea and placed a tray of rock cakes on the table.

Their conversation fell silent for a moment as Harry's thoughts flipped between happiness with Ginny, and an undeniable certainty that she could die for it. "How's Grawp?" Harry asked with a sigh, wanting to forget his troubles for a moment.

"Grawpy? He's fine," said Hagrid. "His English is coming along nicely. And the cen'aur's know ter leave 'im alone."

Harry and Hagrid's conversation past into lighter subjects and he congratulated him on becoming a griffin so quickly. Ten minutes after that Ron and Hermione did arrive, and Harry genuinely smiled as the two of them walked in, hand in hand.

The next hour was spent laughing and joking as Ron and Hermione relayed information from Moody's duelling classes and just talked as friends for once. Harry enjoyed listening to the many events he had missed now he wasn't taking regular lessons. In Transfiguration McGonagall had started to discern if any of them possessed the Animagus ability. It was at this point that Harry decided to tell his friends he was one. It may place them in danger, but they were already in danger. At least Voldemort couldn't get them at Hogwarts.

Needless to say when he told them, it didn't go down easily. First their was disbelief, followed by laughter, followed by confusion, and then finally a bruised acceptance.

"It's true," smiled Hagrid. "Saw 'im change me'self."

"Why didn't you tell us earlier you were training to become an Animagus, Harry?" asked Hermione, a hint of uneasiness in her voice.

"Because I haven't been training," Harry said. "Not really anyway. It was about October last year and McGonagall taught me a few things, but we needed a griffin to continue-

"You're a griffin!" shouted Ron, nearly dropping his tea.

"That's why you have one, Hagrid," Hermione said in a moment of realisation as Hagrid nodded.

"Yeah anyway," continued Harry. "When I touched it yesterday morning it transformed me instantly, without training."

"How?" asked Hermione instantly. "That would be impossible."

"Apparently not," Harry said matter of fact. "I'll show you at the DA

meeting tonight if you want."

"Excellent," smiled Hermione. "We have the new members coming in tonight."

Harry paced the Room of Requirement nervously, awaiting the arrival of the DA. He stared at the Marauder's Map in front of him and watched the dots of everyone move slowly away from the Great Hall. He had left dinner twenty minutes ago, so as to get everything ready. Also because Ginny kept casting furtive glances at him from down the table and Harry wasn't yet sure how to deal with that. He knew that that every time she looked at him though he felt an unidentifiable warmth in his chest.

God... Harry sighed, rubbing his bandaged hand. *I can't afford this...*

Five minutes later and the first members of the DA began to arrive. Hermione, Ron, Neville, Ginny, and Luna all entered together, followed by Seamus and Dean, with Parvati and Lavender. Ginny flashed him a stunning smile and Harry, despite himself, offered a warm one back.

More and more people began to arrive then. Not just old members, but the new recruits as well. Harry had already required the room to be four times its usual size when Cho and Zacharias Smith entered. They were followed by a large group of Ravenclaw fifth, sixth, and seventh years. It took another ten minutes for everyone else to arrive and Harry couldn't help but stare as seven Slytherin fifth years came in last.

"Right," shouted Harry as everybody was finally seated on beanbags or small stools around the slightly larger than usual Defence Association training room. "Thank you all for coming once again." Harry paused here and looked around. He still found it hard to believe that people came here to learn from him. "As most of you know Hogsmeade was attacked two days ago and the first real battle of this war was fought."

"I'll say..." muttered someone from the back.

"Azkaban fortress was also broken open, and many Death Eaters rejoined Voldemort." Harry knew this would be met with absolute silence and a shiver from most at the mention of the Dark Lord's name. "But do

not be discouraged by this. Just as he has increased his numbers, so shall we."

Harry then produced a quill and long piece of parchment from within the pockets of his robes. It was the same quill and parchment that the DA members had signed last time, to prove that they were loyal. The eighty or so new members would have to do the same.

"Before I go any further I want to make it clear to those of you hoping to join tonight." Harry turned to face the sea of faces that mostly belonged to new members. "This is not a club for the weak of heart," he said with a deadly seriousness in his voice. "You are here to learn defensive and offensive spells capable of defending our school. It is not a game, this is real. Should the worst happen and Hogwarts becomes all that stands between Voldemort and victory, you will be called to fight."

Nervous glances were exchanged between the new members and some of the old ones seemed to reassure themselves why they were here. "That said," smiled Harry. "A new member must sign their name on this parchment, and swear loyalty to the DA. I will know if you're lying..." He stopped to stare at them all. "If for any reason," Harry began quietly, "you no longer feel up to this..."

Harry left it there and silently required the door to open. He waited a full minute and in that time not one person left. Harry looked over to his friends and saw Ginny twirling his ring she had taken on her thumb. She met his eyes briefly and he received so much from that one glance. It took Harry another minute to get back on track and when he did he slapped the parchment down on the desk in front of him and put the quill on top of it.

"Slytherins first," he said, somewhat shakily.

Albus Dumbledore walked down the well trodden halls of the ancient International Confederation building, which was located on one of the unpopulated islands of Fiji. It stood alone around a long empty sea and was warded with every possible Muggle repelling charm known.

It was technically in neutral territory, as members from every country on the planet were present for every meeting it ever held. The last meeting held had been that morning, when Dumbledore had positioned the world to see the threat of Voldemort. Two of his most ardent supporters, the Gostauxs, had died barely five hours after that. Dumbledore had called this emergency meeting of the International Council, because time was fast running out.

Every member of the International Confederation held a Portkey in their study that activated when another member called a meeting. It was always in the best interest of a member to attend these meetings, as world events were discussed here.

So it was no surprise to Dumbledore as he walked through amazingly large limestone doors that opened only to a member, that when he walked into the next room, the Grand Chamber, two thousand faces instantly fell on his. A second meeting in one day had been unheard of for fifty years. Only during the rise of Grindelwald and the Muggle War did the Confederation meet more than once a day. It was cause for concern to some.

Dumbledore climbed the stairs to his seat. The room was set out much like the Muggle House of Commons in London. Each seat was occupied by a member, or an ambassador, of their country's Ministry. Many countries had more than one ambassador present, some had up to a dozen. But unlike the House of Commons, each group here was there for their own interests, and that of their Ministry. It was a meeting of ambassadors from every Magical Ministry on the planet, not just the separate political forces of one country. It was a place where the future was decided.

As soon as Dumbledore reached his place the thousands in their seats grew quiet. Along with being an emergency Portkey, the device in a member's study also highlighted who had called the meeting. Many were disgruntled at being called out twice on the same day and just wanted to hear what Dumbledore wanted and then get back to their lives.

Albus Dumbledore folded his hands in front of him for a moment as all

eyes and ears turned to him respectively. Many thought that Dumbledore looked a lot older than he had done so few hours ago, and became worried. It was well known that he was the most powerful wizard present. After a long, suspenseful moment, Dumbledore spoke.

"Good evening," he began, even though sunlight was magically provided at all hours by the enchanted ceiling. "Many of you are probably wondering why I have called this meeting. Hmm?"

A few disgruntled comments were heard around the entire chamber as Dumbledore's voice echoed magnificently to every corner of the room. "I have come to report, amongst other things, that the Member's Gosteaux have been murdered." This was met with an audible gasp and shouts of anger and disbelief, especially from the French representatives.

"No word has reached us of this, sir," the French Ambassador stated, rising from his seat.

"Nevertheless they are dead," Dumbledore countered solemnly. "Lord Voldemort," Several gasps were heard from those who knew the terror of the Dark Lord. "Lord Voldemort," continued Dumbledore, "is tightening his grip on the nation of France."

This was met with either ferocious nods from those who supported Dumbledore, or loud denials from those who thought the possibility of this absurd. Unfortunately, the latter was more numerous. Dumbledore sighed, he had expected this. Denial was always a lot more convenient than effort.

They were digging their own graves.

Harry sighed with relief when the last of the Hufflepuffs signed the parchment without any green sparks to indicate betrayal. Everyone here meant what they had said; they were here to protect Hogwarts from Voldemort and his Death Eaters.

As the new members were signing the parchment, Harry had been counting them. It turned out that there were now one hundred and six members, including Harry. That was perfect for what he had planned

and he realised Hermione and the others must have worked together with the recruiting, because if he didn't count his close group of friends, Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Neville, and Luna, there were now one hundred members even. There were even seven Slytherin members, which was more than Harry was expecting, seeing as how he was expecting none.

"Okay, it's great to see so many of you willing to take a stand," Harry said, pacing the now full DA group, consisting of old and new members alike. "We will begin training properly in about two week's time, after an armourer pays us a visit."

Furious whispers broke out among the assembled members, only Harry's close friends knew about this. "I guess things just got a whole lot more real," Harry smiled sadly to the sea of faces. "I hope you will never have to use it, but yes. A dragon armourer will be outfitting you."

"How much is that going to cost us?" asked a burly Ravenclaw seventh year. Several others now voiced this question.

Harry required a comfortable chair to sit down in in front of the group. It was a cushy armchair and as he sat he spoke. "Cost you? Nothing personally. It is all coming from the DA's budget, which, I can tell you, is two million galleons."

"TWO MILLION!" shouted Seamus, as everyone laughed at him. "Where did that come from?"

Harry smiled sadly. "You have Sirius Black to thank for the money. I know he'd want it to be spent fighting Voldemort..." A deep silence fell on the group as everyone watched the conflicting emotions pass over Harry's face. "And before anyone asks," Harry said sternly. "Sirius was innocent of all his crimes, but I'm not going to get into that story now."

"You can no longer hide from the fact," called Dumbledore to the International Confederation. "If we do not unite soon, the United Kingdom will fall.... And all of you will be next," Dumbledore ended quietly.

There was, of course, tremendous denial to this, but not as much as

there had been that morning. Death did that to people. The Gosteuax murders had rattled the council, they were a highly powerful witch and wizard. If this Dark wizard could get to them...

"To inspire this panic throughout our world is pointless," argued the American ambassador. "Did not this wizard fall to a mere baby once before?"

"He did," agreed Dumbledore reluctantly. He truly hated politics. "But that was under exceptional circumstances."

"I see no threat," argued the ambassador back. "If Britain has become so weak as to call on the world for help, then the more prominent question should be what fools are running your Ministry?" Laughs and shouts of anger met this comment and it took a moment for the room to quiet again.

"In response to your question, Member Johnson," Dumbledore addressed the American. "Britain has become a battle field. Our Ministry is strong, but failing. Such is the power of Lord Voldemort. All of you," Dumbledore's eyes swept over the entire congregation. "All of you will feel the sting of the Dark Lord before long."

"Where is the proof?" argued the Belgians. "How much power does this Voldemort wield?"

Dumbledore sighed. "Truth fears no questions..." he whispered to himself. "He wields a rare type of power... blood magic. He was resurrected with the blood of his sworn enemy, Harry Potter, and is fast becoming stronger. Over three hundred Dark Wizards have also joined his ranks and more do so every day. He is singularly the biggest threat facing our free world. If he is not stopped soon, the innocent will pay...."

"This *Harry Potter*," began the African ambassador. "He is the one that survived *Avada Kedavra*, is he not?"

The United Kingdom and most of Europe may know who Harry Potter was, but he wasn't that well known in countries below the equator, the Southern Hemisphere. Except for Australia, of course, as they were part of the Commonwealth and had already provided Aurors to the cause.

"Yes," said Dumbledore quickly. He didn't want Harry brought up and under too much scrutiny. "But this is not Mr. Potter's fight alone," Dumbledore announced to the chamber so that every member took notice. "As strong as our country is we are calling to you for help. Courage we have, but it is being exhausted by the terrors we face."

There was whispered deliberation between the two thousand members present as Dumbledore stood quietly. If he didn't succeed in winning them over today, there would be another chance, but not forever. Time was, quite severely, running out.

After a long minute of dark thoughts and talk, one of the members for America spoke. "The threat can be handled internally. We believe the United Kingdom is strong enough to face this without international help. To do so will cause panic we have been trying to avoid since the 1940's." This was met with many nods of agreement, too many.

Fools thought Dumbledore. *They will regret this all too soon....* "As you do unto me, you do unto yourself...." Dumbledore sighed gravely, the meeting coming to an unhappy end.

"Okay so from the next meeting on," Harry said to the DA, "from the next meeting on we will have five groups of twenty. Each group will be taught and supervised by either Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Neville, or Luna. I have chosen these five because out of the one hundred here they are the only ones to have had experience fighting Death Eaters."

Harry paced the room in front of the Defence Association, looking from face to face. A glance at the clock told him it was coming up nine o'clock, time to wrap up the meeting. "Each group of twenty will learn a different aspect of defensive and offensive magic for a few lessons. Things like shield charms, hexes, and the Patronus charm will be learnt and then each group will switch to another task. In one month, I expect every group to have cycled through the process at least once."

"You expect us to be able to conjure a Patronus in a *month*?" exclaimed a fifth year Hufflepuff.

Harry turned to face her and she blushed under his gaze. "I expect you to do your best," he said after a moment. "Dementors will more than likely be a threat in the near future. It couldn't hurt to practice this charm outside of the meetings as well. I'm sure you can find an empty classroom."

"You don't seriously expect Hogwart's to be attacked, do you, Harry?" asked Padma Patil.

Harry offered her a small smile, one of friendship, but then his face turned deadly serious. "I don't know what to expect anymore," he said quietly, though everyone heard. "The war is coming. It is as simple as that. I have to kill Voldemort and by God I will," Harry rubbed the bandage on his hand as he said this, his blood oath, his promise to destroy Voldemort. "Hogwarts, if it comes to it, will be the last to fall... I hope it is over before it comes to that, though."

The DA meeting ended ten minutes later. Having been officially recognised by Dumbledore as an organisation to protect the school, Harry wanted to respect the nine o'clock curfew. One hundred students out after curfew would be frowned upon, and Snape would probably love the chance to have the club disbanded.

Harry and his friends had hung back because, as promised, Harry was going to transform into a griffin for them. Something he had been itching to do all evening. It felt good to have the power of flight in his body. So after everybody had left, Ron, Hermione, Neville, Ginny, and Luna, hung back in the room of requirement and Harry called them all over.

"Ready?" Harry asked, and then without waiting for an answer required the room to turn into the big training field he had used the past few days. His friends gasped as the stone and bean bags and the torch lit walls were replaced by a sunny, grass green field that was indistinguishable from the real thing.

"Wow," commented Ron, holding Hermione's hand.

"Let's see you transform, Harry," Ginny smiled warmly at him, a knowing glint in her eye. She had definitely already seen him do it once.

Harry looked at each of the expectant faces of his friends in turn. After taking a few steps back he felt around in his mind for the griffin connection. He found it instantly but didn't push it yet. He gave Ginny a sly smile first and then with a thought, his body was transformed.

Hermione, Neville, Ginny, and Luna gasped loudly and Ron stumbled back in surprise. It had been instant. Where there was once Harry, now stood an impressive Griffin, different from the real griffin Hagrid held by his house. Harry was bigger, more impressive looking than the real thing.

Luna stared at him dreamily, tapping her chin while Hermione tentatively reached out a hand and touched his eagle forehead. Harry took a few steps forward and up to his friends, arching his head to see them better as he was slightly taller than them all. Ginny was watching him with a sad smile he noticed, and after a few moments he transformed back.

"That's amazing, Harry..." whispered Ron. "And it just happened?"

Harry nodded. "No idea how? I think the pure magic may have something to do with it, though..."

The room returned to its previous form and Harry sank back in a chair that appeared behind him, his friends doing the same. "So how was everyone's day?" he asked, his gaze lingering on Ginny for a long moment.

"Tiring," sighed Ron. "Snape wants five feet of parchment on the properties of Glaspeg claw by Monday."

Harry smiled. "I'm glad I don't have to worry about that git anymore."

The fireplace that one of them had required burned warmly a few feet away, casting their shadows against the wall. Neville laughed when Harry insulted Snape and rolled his wand around in his hands. "You really want us to teach, Harry?" he asked after a moment, nerves evident in his voice.

Harry nodded. "Course I do, Nev," he said strongly. "Ginny, Luna, and you can all teach different curses and hexes. Ron you can teach defensive spells because you can create a pretty strong shield charm,

and Hermione you can teach a group the Patronus, as yours is the only corporeal one so far."

"I think, Neville," said Luna, "you will make an excellent teacher." Neville blushed and squeezed Luna's hand warmly.

Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny walked back to the common room together, making little conversation as they hurried to get to the warmth of the fire. It was cold in the long, empty corridors and Harry felt sorry for Neville, who had walked Luna back to her common room, on the other side of the castle.

The four of them entered the common room just after ten o'clock and found it still fairly full with other Gryffindors. It was Friday so most wouldn't go to bed until much later, as it was the weekend and they could sleep in. Not Harry, though, he had training in the morning with Dementors. Still he decided to stay up with his friends anyway, and just talk for once. The past few days had been non stop. Jumping from Death Eater attacks to unpredictable magic to horrific visions. Yes, it had been a trying three days.

"Well I don't want to start Snape's essay now!" exclaimed Ron as Hermione subtly suggested it at the table closest to the fire.

"We could get it out of the way for the weekend," she offered, putting a hand on Ron's shoulder.

Ron smiled and put a hand on her shoulder, looking into her eyes. "No..." he said with a smile. "I'm too damn tired."

Harry smiled as he watched them 'argue'. It was certainly different than when they hadn't realised each others feelings. Then they were both at their throats, now it was more caring. A loving argument, for use of a better word.

Life in the common room whirled around Harry as he sat listening, more than talking, to his friends. Neville returned at one point but the minutes just began to blur for Harry as warm conversation fell around him. At one point he was falling asleep in an armchair by the fire talking to Dean, and

did drop off for a few moments and when he snapped awake Dean had been replaced by Ginny.

Harry looked around quickly and saw Hermione had talked Ron into at least starting his essay over on their table and that there were only about a dozen people left in the room. He locked eyes with Ginny.

"How are you?" she asked gently, placing a hand on his knee, concern buried deep in her eyes.

Harry stared at her for a long moment, a feeling of warmth around his knee where she touched it. "Guess I fell asleep..." he said with a shrug.

Ginny saw the shadow behind his eyes, the horror. "What did you dream about?" she asked.

A quick flashback into his mind and Harry relived his dream in an instant. It was one of those ones where the world was surprisingly real, and he saw things he knew he shouldn't.

"There is a room in the Department of Mysteries," said Dumbledore, "that is kept locked at all times. It contains a force that is at once more wonderful and more terrible than death, than human intelligence, than the forces of nature. It is also, perhaps, the most mysterious of the many subjects for study that reside there. It is the power held within that room that you possess in such quantities and which Voldemort has none at all. That power took you to save Sirius tonight. That power also saved you from possession by Voldemort, because he could not bear to reside in a body so full of the force he detests. In the end, it mattered not that you could not close your mind. It was your heart that saved you."

His vision blurred and it was replaced with a growing circle of light and awesome power. He saw into its depths as a thousand images flicked through its centre in quick succession. It felt to Harry as if he was looking through the radiating circle and beyond his world to another of unimaginable possibilities. A glimpse of the infinite of magic, a space of awesome size. It was breathtaking and... sickening.

A thousand horrific images flickered to life and died before Harry's eyes. He saw Cedric and Sirius fall. He saw Ethan die. He saw Voldemort

murder and destroy, viciously, mercilessly. He saw humanity at its worst.

Ginny saw the shadow behind his eyes, the horror. "What did you dream about?" she asked.

Harry smiled sadly. "Nothing..." he whispered and then looked deep into her eyes. "I can't protect you," he said so quietly it was almost a whisper.

Harry looked away but Ginny took her hand in his. "You don't have to," she whispered, slipping his ring back onto his finger.

He looked back at her and both of their faces became a kaleidoscope of emotion. His eyes were drawn, inevitably, to her lips and then back up to her eyes. *I can't* he told himself... *He'll come... he'll target her...* he reasoned. *She's already a target by association....*

"It is too much to deal with, Ginny," Harry whispered, not letting go of her hand. "Up on the tower earlier... it was like nothing made sense anymore." Harry gazed deep into the fire, the flames reflected green in his eyes. "The things that I thought I understood were gone. I felt so alone... but at the same time you were there..."

"What are you saying, Harry?" Ginny asked, her foot brushing his as she leaned further over from her armchair.

"I don't know....?" he shrugged matter of fact, his voice a distant whisper. "Love... it's all new to me...."

Ginny nearly reached out and hugged him then, but she was self conscious of the people still in the common room, at least of Ron and Hermione. Too many questions would be raised, and she knew Harry was trying to avoid that. "Why are you fighting it then?" she asked gently.

Harry thought deeply and agonisingly for a moment. "Because... I'd rather not have it, if it could get you killed."

"What if it's worth it, though?" questioned Ginny. "What if it is more important than life or death?"

It was your heart that saved you....

Harry sighed for a moment in thought. "You shouldn't have to worry

about me," he said slowly, rubbing his itching scar. "Please don't...."

Neither can live while the other survives....

Ginny would not be deterred, though. "You can't live your life alone, Harry. Too much is happening. You need to talk to someone, someone who cares. The pain will destroy you otherwise...."

Harry looked at her with a slight frown, as if a great battle of wills was clashing in his mind. To Ginny he looked confused, but after a moment his face resolved back into that calm, neutral look he usually wore. "I don't want you to hear what I could say," Harry replied. "My nightmares are best left untold."

"It can't be that bad, Harry," Ginny whispered earnestly, "that you need to shut the whole world out."

Harry just smiled sadly, and turned to look at the fire, as the final embers slowly died out.

Harry was up early the next morning, as he always was, and was quickly down the castle floors to the Entrance Hall for his training with Siamus Scrapfold and Dernas. They exercised together for two hours and Harry was happy to see that after the few weeks he had been doing this, his running was a lot easier than it had been.

After exercise with Siamus, he and Dernas moved onto sword training. Harry had learned a lot in the brutal training that Trask had put him under the past month and was actually surprised when he managed to strike a blow at Dernas. Dernas blocked it quickly of course, but it was the first Harry had ever managed to do that almost knocked his trainer off guard.

The snow around the castle was still shin deep on the ground in some places but it probably wouldn't snow again now the climate was coming out of winter. It was still fairly cold, but Harry and Dernas no longer needed to light their fire in the ground, as they were warm enough from their training.

"You seem distracted today, Harry," Trask breathed as he and Harry

took a break, sitting on a wooden log. "What's the matter? Girl trouble?"

Harry blinked and fell out of his thoughts about Ginny. "Something like that..." he replied to Dernas and picked up his training stick. "Ready to go again?"

"You don't want to talk then?" Dernas was nothing if he wasn't full on. No beating around the bush for him.

Harry thought for a moment and looked at Dernas, thinking about it. "People who get close to me die," he said with an edge of bitterness in his voice.

"Yet they still get close to you," Trask mused, raising an eyebrow. "If someone is willing to take the risk, Harry, you shouldn't let them slip away... it may never happen again..."

Harry twirled his stick around absently, not replying. "Come on," Dernas said reassuringly after a moment, picking up his own stick. "On your guard!"

Harry saw his friends again at lunch and they talked happily about the weekend. He couldn't stay however, as he had a lesson with Thomas Fright, his offensive and defensive magic teacher at one o'clock and was soon learning a few nasty curses, other than the ones he had taken it upon himself to learn in the room of requirement. They were just as nasty, though.

After that he had Charms and Healing with Grace Arnair. He learnt a useful charm that was really a branch of Transfiguration. He learned how to animate small objects, such as a tiny statue. It was similar to what Dumbledore had done in his duel with Voldemort at the Department of Mysteries, animating the Fountain of Magical Brethren, but on a much smaller scale. It would take a lot of practice if Harry wanted to get to Dumbledore's level.

Finally, for that day, Harry had Magical Tuning with Rose Appleton. He managed to bend a spoon with just a thought and he could levitate any object up to and including the weight of a cauldron, with just a thought. He was progressing magnificently, but all the effort he had put into today

quickly caught up to him later that night, and he was first to go up to bed that night, thankful that he got a break tomorrow. As sleep took him and Harry finally pulled the red drapes around his bed, he last saw a glimpse of the night sky, and the planet of War, Mars, burning slowly overhead.

REBUILDING BEGINS

By Ian Lyterman

Following the devastating attacks on our fair village of Hogsmeade last Wednesday, construction and rebuilding of the town has begun after the clean up and mass funeral service held Saturday morning. The largest battle fought between Aurors and Death Eaters left the village decimated, and the High Street in smouldering ruins.

If it wasn't for the heroic efforts of our Auror squads, some staff from Hogwarts, and Harry Potter, then the village may not be standing at all. In fact, some eye witnesses claim that Harry Potter duelled with the Dark Lord and the ferocity of their duel caused much of the damage to the surrounding area.

The world is now familiar with the Prophecy concerning You-Know-Who and the junior wizard, Mr. Potter. If the recent attack at Hogsmeade taught us one thing, it is that Potter is remarkably resilient and powerful. Goris Granghorn even told this reporter that Potter stood alone against He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named and his Death Eaters, in an attempt to delay the destruction of the village in time for the Auror forces to arrive.

"He showed no fear," said Granghorn. "Even after ten minutes under Cruciatus, Mr. Potter stood and managed to duel You-Know-Who. I could hardly believe what I was seeing. Just looking at You-Know-Who caused me to shake uncontrollably and yet this young man didn't break for a moment."

Courage such as this is proof enough that there is hope yet for our world. Wizarding Britain once again raises their glasses to Harry Potter and thanks him for doing his best.

Harry tossed the Sunday edition of the *Prophet* aside lazily. He didn't really care anymore what they said about him, even though this was true.

They could say what they want about him, but watch out if they ever included his friends in the lies and slander again. Though, to be fair, Rita didn't have that power anymore.

Out of the corner of his eye Harry saw all the glances he was attracting as the Hogwarts populus read the article and word spread of his latest exploit. He smiled slightly at this, if they believed the article it would show them that Voldemort wasn't all powerful, he wasn't immortal.

"Cruciatu for ten minutes...." muttered Ron, his eyes scanning the article quickly. "Jesus, Harry. You didn't tell us about that."

"That's an exaggeration," Harry said quickly.

Hermione placed a hand on his in comfort. "How long was it then?" she asked.

Harry sighed. "Eight minutes... maybe..." Hermione flinched and Neville visibly paled, he had felt the cruciatu for only a few seconds and it was an experience he wouldn't like to repeat. "I didn't feel it all of the time," Harry added quickly. "After a few minutes my magic sort of took over and pushed away the pain. One of those things I couldn't control but glad it happened, like the griffin."

Ginny blinked and looked into Harry's eyes, drawing his gaze to her. "Should that be happening, though?" she asked worriedly. No one could answer her question, too many troubling answers.

The first few days of the week past in a blur of training and high level magic for Harry. His training was intense every day and he found it very testing on his magic, which seemed more than happy to be used, never giving out. It was from physical exertion and not magical, that Harry's exhaustion came from.

There was a DA meeting on Tuesday night and as he had planned, it was successful. Ginny, Hermione, Ron, and Luna were excellent teachers in their field and even Neville gained confidence after the first time he taught a new curse to the group of twenty fifth years he took. They revised the disarming charm and the Impediment jinx. Neville was

soon in his element. Hermione left early, though, as she wanted to see her parents in the guest wing.

He and Ginny shared some close moments throughout the week. He couldn't deny his feelings for her any more than he could deny the awesome power that resided in him. His conversations with her and Dermal kept coming into his mind whenever he spoke to her and he knew she was more than willing to help. It was just the unbelievable risk involved in confiding in her, being with her. He hated himself and the world for it, but the unrelenting truth was that they were at war and Harry was at the head of it. The danger surrounding him was the worst there could be.

Though Voldemort had been quiet the past few days and that worried Harry. It was on Wednesday that Harry felt his first twinge of pain in his scar since the weekend, but that was it and after a few hours with no more Harry began to think he may have even imagined that. He hadn't....

It was on Friday morning that Harry woke up sick to his stomach. His dreams, no, his nightmares had been devastating, unrelenting, evil, but he couldn't remember them for the life of him as he sat in a cold sweat on his bed, the pale morning light illuminating the drapes.

Harry closed his eyes and pressed his aching scar, trying desperately to remember what had happened, he knew it had been something... there was *fire* and *green light*... *death*? *Something cataclysmic had happened, Harry knew it.*

His exercise that morning at five a.m. was hard as he was mentally exhausted from the nightmare he couldn't remember. The memory of it was just on the edge of his mind, but also just out of reach. Harry also felt slightly relieved that he *didn't* remember it, as he knew it had been bad, but if there was any chance he could save someone he knew he had to try and remember. But it was no good. After some brief sword training with Dermal, Harry walked back up to the castle for breakfast, but not feeling very hungry.

After entering the warm castle Harry walked into the Great Hall and saw

that Ron and Hermione had just sat down as he had entered. Making his way unsteadily on his legs, Harry sat down opposite his best friends, attracting a few concerned looks from the students he passed.

"Harry!" exclaimed Hermione as she looked at him. "You look terrible. What happened?"

Harry offered a small smile but he knew he couldn't hide anything from Hermione. "Bad dreams..." he whispered, looking at her pointedly.

"What did you see?" asked Ron quietly as Ginny and Neville sat down next to Harry, immediately concerned as they took in Harry's sickly appearance.

Harry shook his head, wiping the cold sweat of his brow. A quick glance at the teacher's table told him that Dumbledore was absent, and that something wasn't right. He could feel it more in the atmosphere of the Hall. A storm was about to break. Even Snape looked uncharacteristically sad, regretful. "I don't know what I saw," he said nervously. "But it wasn't good...."

Harry picked at a piece of buttered toast, feeling in no way hungry as his friends cast worried glances his way and Ginny squeezed his shoulder reassuringly. After about ten minutes spent in silence the post owls descended on the now full Great Hall. The only person absent was Dumbledore, which Harry didn't take as a good sign. He looked up into the flurry of owls and didn't see any snowy white so turned back to the table.

The bird that delivered the *Prophet* to Hermione landed with a hoot and Hermione took the paper, offering the bird a rasher of bacon before it took flight again. Harry closed his eyes as his stomach did flips inside of him, making him retch slightly, as if he was going to be sick but it didn't happen. He placed a hand on his stomach and breathed in deeply, he was just about to go get a stomach settling potion from Madam Pomfrey when a series of shrill screams broke out in the Hall almost instantly.

One of these came from Hermione, and the others from a few people who had copies of the *Prophet* in their hands. Harry looked over to her

instantly, just in time to see her pale considerably and to drop the paper numbly.

"Hermione," said Ron quickly, grasping her hand. "What...?"

"The paper...." she said quietly, desperately. Ron turned to grab the paper but Harry had beaten him to it and was reading the headline with a growing horror and realisation.

BEAUXBATONS ACADEMY DESTROYED

Special correspondent Marie Antilles reporting

The world woke to absolute terror this morning, as news came from the French Ministry during the night that the Dark Lord had attacked France with the destruction of the magical school, Beauxbatons Academy, located on the Mediterranean coast. Reports are sketchy at best but it is clear that the magical institution has been destroyed. No official death tolls are known but it is expected to be catastrophic, as the first sign of disturbance was several hundred Dark Marks, the symbol of You-Know-Who, floating in an eerily quiet green light over the remains of the once proud school.

Ancient wards protected the school, which was home to seven hundred and fifty six young wizards and witches in training and twenty two members of staff, but it would appear that not even they could withstand the power of the Dark Lord. The French Ministry has seen this as an open declaration of war, and has sworn to throw its full might behind the Ministry of the United Kingdom to help win the war against the Dark Lord.

This attack couldn't have come at a worse time, especially on the heels of the International Confederations decision that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is not a threat, merely an annoyance. The question now is: If this annoyance can destroy an institution as magically protected as Beauxbatons, then what could a real threat do?

Hundreds may have died at Beauxbatons, the first casualties of a now international war that may further engulf our magical world if steps are not taken to counter the problem now. The world has been giving a

rough awakening with this attack... and how it responds will decide our future. More details will be reported in the Evening Prophet and over the WWN.

Harry reeled and barely finished the article before a torrent of unrealised memories broke through the binding in his mind and he relived the horror that was the destruction of Beauxbatons Academy. He saw Voldemort and a legion of Death Eaters break through the castle wards, some extremely advanced and powerful magic, and he saw the last defence of the teachers there. His mind flickered through a thousand devastating moments in an instant and Harry fell backwards from the table, his scar burning, as he saw the huge manor house that was Beauxbatons, explode in green flames. Voldemort stood victorious on the rubble, his wand aimed towards the sky, a stream of dark light shooting from it. His Dark Mark was soon joined by hundreds of others from the Death Eaters present, lighting the sky for miles around.

The first thing Harry saw when he opened his eyes was the concerned, strict face of Professor McGonagall. A second later he realised that he was lying on the floor of the Great Hall with several dozen faces looking down upon him. There was also a fluid in his right eye, he felt. He knew it must be blood from his scar. From the pain it had burst open once again.

"Bad dream..." he croaked, taking Ron's offered hand and pulling himself back up onto the long bench at the Gryffindor table. "Hundreds did die," he whispered, those near him deadly quiet as Harry stared at the copy of the *Prophet*, that was slightly stained red with his blood. "First years... teachers... house elves... all slaughtered," he finally coughed, accepting a goblet of pumpkin juice from Ginny.

After a moment in which Professor McGonagall shooed the crowd away, Harry spoke again. "Professor," he said, not realising he was holding onto Ginny's hand. "I-"

"I know, Harry," she said kindly, nervously. She was obviously uncertain as what to do in this situation. For use of a better phrase, it was *beyond* her. "I believe we should go see the Headmaster," she said with a shake. "Follow me, Harry."

Harry stood up with a groan and let go of Ginny's hand. His body

protesting the movement, but he kept going. The eyes of every person in the Hall followed him silently on the way out and Harry was glad to leave them behind. McGonagall kept casting nervous glances at him as they walked and more than once she caught him as he stumbled.

The images of the destruction kept hitting Harry like a sledge hammer as he walked. Something new surfacing from the nightmare he had struggled so hard to remember, the *Prophet* article forcing it out of him brutally. He shuddered and sighed with a slight whimper, wiping the blood from his eye.

The staircase to Dumbledore's office was already raised as they arrived so McGonagall and Harry walked up slowly. At the top stair Harry saw the door was slightly ajar and McGonagall knocked once quickly to announce their arrival before pushing it open fully, walking in with Harry on tow. Dumbledore was talking to the head of Arthur Weasley in the fire and looked up the instant they entered.

"Minerva..." Dumbledore said tiredly. "It is worse than we-"

"Albus," McGonagall said sternly as Harry limped into view. Dumbledore's expression immediately turned to one of concern as he took in Harry's slumped form and bloody face.

"We will have to continue this another time, Arthur," Dumbledore said as the portraits around the room whispered to each other.

"Certainly, Headmaster," Mr. Weasley said and then turned his head in the fire. "Harry, are you okay?" he asked.

Harry looked into the green flames and saw the destruction of the Academy in them. He made to nod at Mr. Weasley, but stopped halfway through, looking away. Arthur gave one worried look to Dumbledore and then ended the floo call, his face disappearing as the flames died.

"Harry... you saw it?" asked Dumbledore, dreading and realistically already knowing the answer.

Harry did nod this time, before leaning silently against the wall, touching his bloody scar with a look of confusion upon his face that was actually a rough acceptance. He didn't miss the look between Dumbledore and

McGonagall, though.

"Perhaps you would like to sit down?" asked Dumbledore gently as McGonagall steered him towards one of the armchairs near the fireplace that Dumbledore had just conjured. Harry didn't really have the energy to object, so he sat down with a sigh.

"How are you feeling, Harry?" asked the headmaster after a moment's silence.

Harry blinked and adjusted his glasses. "Tired..." he managed. "I think I'm gonna go ask Madam Pomfrey for a dreamless sleep potion." He made to stand up then but Dumbledore pushed him back down with a bit of force.

"We need to talk about this, Harry. How did it happen?"

Harry frowned. "Voldemort and several hundred Death Eaters took down the wards somehow and then proceeded to slaughter anything that moved. He then blew up the school and shot the Dark Mark into the air," Harry cracked his knuckles. "None were spared... I.. I don't know if anyone escaped?" A silent tear fell from his left eye.

"We have lost a powerful ally," Dumbledore said sadly. "More will now join Tom out of fear..." The Headmaster appeared to be musing to himself, but Harry heard him and that, coupled with his nightmares, made him angry and pushed him over the edge.

Where was Dumbledore's emotion? He had not shown any since Harry had entered. At least none Harry could see. Hundreds of lives had been viciously ended and yet Dumbledore was thinking more about how this affected the war than it did the people involved. It was too much, Harry lost it. He lashed out at Dumbledore, his anger blinding him to all else.

"HOW CAN YOU DO IT?" he shouted as Dumbledore blinked in surprise and McGonagall gasped. "You treat the world as if it's one big game. Christ, these are real people we are talking about. They had families, friends, *lives*..." Harry bit back an insult and closed his eyes heavily. "They had names... don't you care about the loss?" he finished weakly.

The Headmaster did care, but a life time of the horrors of the world and

having to be at the head of the opposition fighting them had caused him to think in terms of the bigger picture. It was a sad reality and as Harry shouted Dumbledore's mind flicked to all those lost or destroyed in the many wars he had seen. When he replied to Harry he did so with the thoughts of a hundred years of loss in his mind.

"Of course I care," Dumbledore said, somewhat fiercely. "I care about the loss of

human lives all across this world, but I don't have time to remember all those whose fates were unavoidable. They chose to fight and, I know it sounds cold, but knew full well the risk." Dumbledore's eyes held no twinkle, but he looked as if he had aged many years in a few moments. "Whether they be Death Eaters or not I am concerned with the survival and freedom of our world. That always comes first. The individual may need to be sacrificed for the greater good."

Harry didn't say anything, didn't move, barely breathed through the anger. Those who knew him well would see from the dangerous glint in his eyes that he was absolutely furious. "Those at Beauxbatons didn't choose to fight," he said coldly, a shadow in his eyes. "I didn't choose to fight...."

With that Harry stood up with a new burst of strength and, ignoring Dumbledore's and McGonagall's calls, ran from the study and down the stairs he had walked up far too many times the past few months.

The sickness he had been feeling that morning had lessened as the shock of what had happened sunk in. It was terrible, horrendous, but it was true. It was definitely one of the darker things Harry had seen, but it had happened and he had promised to see this war through to the end. He had made a blood promise to stop it and he would give it his all until death claimed either him or Voldemort.

Harry walked back up to the common room through the empty corridors as everyone was now in classes. It had just turned nine so period one had just started. He didn't cry as he walked, that was a weakness that he could do without. He knew it was only going to get worse and he knew he had to stay strong. As soon as he thought this he knew that must be what Dumbledore was doing. He had to present to the world his strength,

had to show the world that the side of light was not intimidated, didn't crumble under the brutal assault of one sadistic madman.

Harry knew what Dumbledore did was hard, he did it himself and the cost was almost unbearable. How long had Dumbledore been doing it? Fifty, sixty years? To appear strong and to give the world hope was the loneliest thing a person could do. He would apologise for his outburst to the headmaster later, what Dumbledore had said was truth, a dark, realistic version of it anyway.

Harry sank into an armchair by the fire and sighed with the exhaustion he almost always felt. It had become a lot more real now, he reflected. The world would realise the horror, they had to unite... they just had to. Closing his eyes, Harry rubbed his head and tried to force the headache out. It was pounding into him relentlessly, darkening his world. Right about now he should have been in Offensive magic with Thomas Fright. It didn't matter, he would be excused.

The images from Beauxbatons kept surfacing in his mind. They were so real it felt as if he had actually been there. A part of him had. "DAMN IT!" he shouted, throwing a small porcelain cup that he grabbed off of the table next to him at the wall. It, of course, smashed and broke into a hundred different pieces. He looked at it sadly and then with a wave of his hand repaired it and put it back on the table.

It was getting to him. The pain, anguish, murder, the immoral demon that was Voldemort. He was fused together with that creature and was forced to witness his most horrific acts, while Voldemort took a sick pleasure in them. All in the name of blood. *IT'S NOT FAIR!* He screamed in his mind, collapsing back into the armchair he had risen from a moment ago.

After struggling desperately for a moment with his memories, Harry tried relax. He was so alone, he was so cold, he was... lost. Too many times had he duelled with death and won, but at a great cost. Too many times he had witnessed the horror of war. It was all too real and there was no happy ending in sight. He was losing it again.

"HARRY!" shouted a familiar voice from the portrait hole.

Harry jumped up suddenly, the veil before his eyes falling away as Ginny

came into view, her eyes held heartbreaking tears. She had seen the look of fear and horror upon Harry's face a moment ago. It had truly scared her, it wasn't the look of her Harry. It was something darker.

"What's the matter?" Harry asked quickly, grasping her by the shoulders. This seemed to be the wrong thing to say.

"For God's sake, Harry," she said quickly as tears fell. "Think about yourself for once. I'm fine. It's you who needs help."

Harry frowned and let go of her shoulders, turning away as she shook slightly with quiet sobs. He sighed with his headache and his thoughts drifted back to that of a moment ago. He realised he must have scared Ginny, scared her bad. He didn't want to do that.

"You're breaking, Harry," Ginny whispered.

Harry turned back to face her and smiled sadly, his eyes holding a sadness so deep. "It seems you're always there to catch me when I'm right on the edge, though."

Ginny sniffed and wiped her eyes and cheeks of tears. She pushed a loose strand of auburn hair back behind her ear and looked tear filled eyes with Harry. They were standing so close. "I've always been there for you, Harry," she said a little shakily. "I've always been there to catch you.... I think you only just realised that a week ago, though... up on the tower."

Harry blinked and his own emerald eyes filled with unshed tears. "I'm sorry," he breathed and then leaned in and caught her lips in his own.

Chapter 27 - Take a Deep Breath

The way to bring out the best in the British people is to attack them.

~~ Alasdair Macintyre

Harry side stepped Dernas' blow easily and countered quickly with one of his own. It was blocked of course and another returned. He jumped back and swung his stick around hard, the sound of wood hitting wood resounding across the empty Hogwart's grounds and the vast expanse of the ice crusted lake.

Time blurred as their sword sticks whistled through the air in carefully calculated moves, leaving no margin for error. They were attacking each other at such a rate, that a mistake on either's part could result in a broken finger, or rib, or wherever the blow fell.

"Impressive, Harry," smiled Trask, spinning on his ankle and repelling a strike from his student. "See I told Snape you aren't a useless waste of space, as he put it."

Harry laughed, but he was panting heavily from their fight. "He said that?"

Trask nodded and with a swing brought his stick crashing down into Harry's shoulder. Harry winced in pain but it was nothing new. Recovering quickly, he took a swipe at Dernas' legs, causing the blade master to jump back. Harry moved his shoulder, assessing the damage. It stung, it ached, but it wasn't broken. A bruise maybe, but nothing worse.

"That hurt..." Harry managed, blocking another onslaught from Trask.

"Well, yeah," smiled Dernas. "A knock like that would."

Harry shook his head and grasped his stick with two hands, giving himself more strength with which to block and attack with. He parried around the slushy ground, slick with icy snow, and then with a cry brought his whittled stick crashing down hard towards Trask's skull. Dernas got his up to block it of course, but the force in which it struck jarred both of their arms and snapped the sticks into a hundred splinters that whistled away in all directions. Both Harry and Dernas were left with a splintery broken stub in their hands.

"Oops," Harry shrugged, stepping back and throwing his stub to the ground.

"Nicely done," breathed Trask. "I've taught you all I can with the sticks. Time to move on to something more real, I think."

"You mean real swords?" asked Harry, sitting down on the log as they always did after training.

Trask sat down as well. "Yes. It'll be different, a lot more dangerous, but you'll manage. You've come a long way already."

Nodding, Harry looked to the palm of his left hand, at the slightly ropy scar that cut diagonally across it. He touched it and it tingled, it was sensitive. It was his blood promise, bonded in magic. It was the promise he would kill, or die trying.

After training with Dermas, Harry headed back up to his common room. The castle was still asleep as he and Trask had been out early because of his struggles with nightmares. Images of destruction haunted his mind, namely that of Beauxbatons. Hundreds had died, and not just Muggle borns, but purebloods as well. But there had been several dozen survivors, that had fled to the French Ministry, which was mobilising its Aurors for war. Madam Maxime, the half giantess Headmistress of the school, had led four members of staff and fifty two students to safety.

After entering the common room he discovered, to no surprise, that no one else was up yet. It was only six thirty in the morning. The sounds of movement and showers running could be heard up the stairs though. Harry's eyes instinctively flicked over to the fireplace, where he had kissed Ginny three days ago. It had been an impulsive thing, something he had wanted to do. Ginny hadn't complained of course, but what did it mean....

They had agreed to take it slow. Harry had told her that nobody could know, not yet. It was too dangerous, too many enemies. If he lost her, if he lost any of his friends, Harry wasn't sure what he would do then. It wouldn't be good, he knew that much. Since that kiss, he reflected, nothing much had happened. There were a few heart warming smiles whenever they met and they had talked briefly once or twice.

She was his strongest tether against all the bad in his life. Along with his friends, and the unbreakable conviction to destroy Voldemort for the rest

of the world, Harry felt slightly happy for once. He had something to fight for, something to strive for. He and Ginny couldn't be happy until the war was over and the world could not survive if Voldemort did. All of this had strengthened Harry's resolve against the insurmountable odds and his will to defeat Voldemort. Ginny's love, her kindness, her selflessness, had pulled him back from the abyss and he had seen a thousand reasons to continue the good fight. It had been close... too close, but the world was now awakening along with Harry, to fight against their common foe.

Harry headed back up to his dorm and opened the door just as Seamus and Ron walked sleepily out towards the showers. Ron patted Harry on the back in an attempt at a greeting and muttered something about canary creams before yawning heavily.

"Morning, Ron," Harry said with a smile and walked over to his trunk. After flinging it open, Harry took out his day's attire. Marcus Elendil had sent the fully restored, armoured boots, cloak, and pants last Saturday. Along with his chest plate, Harry now had the full set. He pulled out a pair of jeans and a loose white polo shirt before collecting the dragon hide boots and chest piece.

Ten minutes later he emerged fresh and clean from the shower, dressed in his black jeans and boots. He wore the polo shirt and the chest armour could be seen as a dark blur underneath it. Harry went back to his trunk and was about to close the lid when a glint of silver caught his eye. Harry reached in and pulled out Ethan's blade.

Harry sighed and looked the dagger up and down. This dagger was about eleven inches long from handle to blade, the blade being seven inches long. The handle was black and the blade had runes etched the length of it. The runes he wasn't familiar with, but Harry now knew what he was going to do with the blade.

He pulled up the cuff of his jeans and looked down to the boot on his right foot, or more accurately, at the sheath built into the boot for a dagger. He slipped it in easily, as if this particular sheath had been made for this blade. The boot itself came up and over his shin so there was enough room for the seven inch blade and the hilt was easy enough to

grasp. It fit perfectly and the weight was nothing more. He could feel the dagger on the side of his leg and it was reassuring, another weapon.

After cleaning his glasses with a quick wave of his hand, Harry headed down to the common room to find Ron, Hermione, and Ginny waiting patiently for him.

"Morning," he said, as they made their way to the portrait hole.

"You up early again, Harry?" asked Hermione, taking Ron's hand with a comfortable familiarity as they walked side by side.

"You definitely look tired," Ginny commented.

Harry nodded. "Sleep doesn't come easy anymore. Dermal and I got in some longer practice earlier this morning."

They fell in with the crowds heading towards the Great Hall as they passed the many portraits and suits of armour, talking softly. Once in the Hall, Harry and Ginny sat next to each other on one side of the table, whilst Hermione and Ron took the other. Glancing at the staff table, Harry saw once again that Dumbledore wasn't there. He had not seen the Headmaster since his outburst in his study last Friday.

Harry absentmindedly ate a bacon sandwich as he waited for the arrival of the post owls. After finding out about Beauxbatons the hard way, Harry had sent off for his own subscription to the *Daily Prophet*. He had paid for a year's worth in advance so all he had to do was wait for the delivery owl to arrive.

"It's starting to get a little warmer," Ginny whispered to him, looking up at the enchanted ceiling.

Harry brushed her hand with his under the table and smiled. "What have you got first today?" he asked.

"Transfiguration," she answered. "How about you?"

"Charms and Healing all the way up to lunch."

"Have you seen Dumbledore lately, Harry?" asked Hermione.

Harry looked up to her and his eyes also flicked over to the High table. "Not since Friday. I think he may have gone to France, you know."

Hermione nodded as she sliced a piece of fruit in half. "I hope other countries help now, as well," she whispered. "I mean it's about time they saw what a threat You-Know-Who is."

Ron sighed and passed a hand through his scruffy hair. "They probably won't want a bloody thing to do with it," he said with a slight edge to his voice. "I mean would you, if you had the choice?"

"That'll be what Dumbledore's doing," Harry said in a moment of realisation. "With somewhere as strong as Beauxbatons gone, he'll be using that to convince more Ministries to get involved."

"Do you think that'll work?" asked Ginny.

No one spoke for a moment as they all thought about that. "If it doesn't," Harry said grimly after a lone minute, "it is going to be a lot harder for me to kill him."

Ron scoffed. "As if that isn't going to be hard enough," he joked, attempting to put some much needed humour into their conversation.

It was at this moment that the post owls descended upon the Great Hall and a stony silence passed over all the people in there. Nobody could know what tales of death and destruction the paper brought, if any at all. Students and teachers alike lived in almost constant fear of hearing that somewhere, someone they knew had been attacked.

Harry pulled his paper from the bird's leg before it had even landed. The offended owl took off again with a disgruntled hoot. Harry unrolled the paper with a growing sense of dread clenching his stomach, but his face remained a mask of calm.

Worlds of Change

Ian Lighterman

In a shocking decision by the International Confederation late last night, following intense discussions with the Headmaster of Hogwart's school

of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Albus Dumbledore, a task force is being created with the aid of several world wide Ministries in the biggest joint project since the days of the Muggle World War.

As the threat of the Dark Lord grows with every passing day, and more and more join his legion, the Ministries of the United Kingdom, Australia, France, Germany, America, New Zealand, Italy and Canada, have united in a stand against You-Know-Who. An army is to be created from Aurors and Hit wizards from every Ministry named above.

Details are unknown at this early stage but the 'Army of Light' as it is already being called, is expected to number at least eight hundred witches and wizards, and, with the insistence of Albus Dumbledore, is to be positioned at the school of Hogwarts. Now one of two magical schools in the Northern hemisphere, Hogwarts is the largest school in the world. With the power shown by You-Know-Who through the destruction of the Beauxbatons wards, Hogwarts has been highlighted as the largest potential target within Europe. The Army of Light will be there to guard the school, as well as the neighbouring village of Hogsmeade, from attack.

Not everyone is seeing this as ideal, though. With the involvement of so many Ministries, the Dark Lord's servants are, unfortunately, expected to triple. The Dark Wizards throughout the world may flock to You-Know-Who's side as their country involves itself in the growing war.

We, in Great Britain, are now entered into a conflict of a global scale and the outcome is extremely uncertain. Intelligence from around the world suggests that many Dark Wizards have already begun migrating to our shores and that You-Know-Who is gathering his strength for a crushing blow on the school of Hogwarts. The Dark Lord's location is currently unknown, but many sources believe he may be drawing his Dementors to him from one of the many hidden castles of Salazar Slytherin, whose location is only known to a direct descendant from that line.

The storm is coming. Albus Dumbledore has been saying it for almost two years, and, for the most part, has been ignored. Our safety has been ripped away as the horrors of war once again fall across the world. The Muggle heads of government have, of course, been alerted to the threat

but beyond that they are merely spectators to the darkness. Nothing anymore is certain; no longer can we be sure of our peace, of our freedom.

A few now lead us against our common enemy, in the greatest military undertaking in half a century. The Prophet will, beginning tomorrow, Tuesday the 25th of February, be printing a special war booklet in every edition of the paper. This booklet will contain current information on the state of our fight and of the battles, losses, and victories gained in the coming weeks.

Pg 2 - Transcript of Confederation Meeting

Pg 5 - The fall of the Dark Lord

Pg 9 - Harry Potter's Fate

Harry folded the paper back over in his hands and looked at the table in front of him. To his friends it appeared that he was staring past the table, and into thoughts that none of them could ever share. It was the look of someone who was trying to get a handle on life, and finding nothing. It was the look of defeat.

"Harry..." Ginny said urgently, as she put down her own copy of the paper. "What's the matter? This is good, isn't it?"

Harry didn't say anything for a moment as he turned and stared at her, no emotion on his face betraying his feelings. He finally smiled slightly and spoke. "I suppose...." he managed, "but a lot of people are going to die for this. Too many...."

"Mum's going to go mental when she reads this," Ron sighed from across the table. "Hogwarts likely to be attacked...."

"Creating an army here, though..." whispered Harry, they all heard him. "A lot has changed...."

For the rest of that day Harry trained hard. He worked fast through the curses Thomas Fright set him to learn and did them so many times they were ingrained into his memory. He learned curses that would stun, that would destroy, and that would break bones. He strived to learn

everything short of the Unforgivables.

In Magical Tuning he successfully managed to stop a cauldron from hitting him that Rose had levitated through the air. Without even moving Harry stopped it dead in the air with a thought. He was progressing with this branch of magic so fast that soon he would be in a league of his own.

Monday gave way to Tuesday and Harry had his first sword lesson with Dernas that actually required the use of a sword. Harry had called Gryffindor's sword from within him, but at first the weight of it felt unfamiliar in his hands after the weeks of training with a stick. He and Dernas took things slowly, practicing their moves efficiently so as not to injure each other. It was one thing to work with a stick, it was another to work with an extremely sharp blade. They had to be careful; a mistake here could cost one of them their life. It was a very fine art.

The world was changing around the sanctuary that was Hogwarts, though. Many Wizarding families were fleeing Britain as they saw it, correctly, as the place where the major battles would be fought. A hundred new Auror recruits had been called for by the Ministry. After leading the forces of Light against that of Dark in Hogsmeade, Kingsley Shacklebolt had been given command of training the Aurors. It was a position that would give the Order more power at the Ministry, and more access to its resources.

Voldemort had disappeared, completely and despairingly. He was simply nowhere to be found. The Dementors had not been active, no Muggles had lost their lives or their souls, and Death Eater sightings were nil. It was as the *Prophet* speculated. It appeared as if Voldemort was gathering all his strength for an attack. The target was, presumably, Hogwarts.

Dumbledore had returned to the castle and given a speech over breakfast that morning, informing students and staff alike about the current state of things. An army of Aurors was indeed going to be marshalled at the school and would operate out of special headquarters that would be constructed along the road leading to Hogsmeade. Students were advised to give them a wide berth as they patrolled the castle and its grounds. The first Aurors were expected to arrive in a week,

from the British Ministry and France. The rest would follow at intervals soon after, determined by their own Ministry.

The International Confederation had also agreed to alert the entire world of the growing threat and provide information daily on the crisis. A huge battle was imminent, that much was clear. With both sides preparing themselves and increasing their numbers, a major confrontation was inevitable. And, as the biggest army of Aurors in the world was going to be based near Hogwarts, there was a fair chance Voldemort would strike there first, and wipe out one of the biggest threats. At least that is what Harry concluded he would do, and considering he knew Voldemort better than most, he was probably right.

At lunch time that Tuesday, Harry received another owl from Marcus Elendil, the dragon armourer. He wanted to confirm their agreement that tomorrow he would come to the school and outfit the DA. He also said that he would be bringing nine of his employees with him and asked that Harry reply to this as soon as possible.

"Who's that from, Harry?" asked Ginny from across the table. She nudged his shin with her foot as she spoke and smiled warmly when Harry looked up at her.

"Marcus Elendil," Harry replied kindly. "He and a few of his workers are coming to the school tomorrow to outfit the DA."

Ginny nodded but frowned. "I think Dumbledore should be told if anyone is coming to the school, Harry," she said. "They could be Death Eaters."

Harry nodded in agreement. He had already thought of that but really didn't want to see Dumbledore yet. They hadn't spoken since their argument last Friday, when he had stormed out after explaining the destruction of Beauxbatons. Dumbledore hadn't expressed much sympathy or sadness for the destruction. He had looked at it from a strategic point of view. He had looked at how it would affect the war, not at how many lives had been lost or ruined. Harry knew that it was Dumbledore's job to do that, as no one else could. But it had still angered him. Though, as Ginny had said, he needed to be told.

Looking up at the staff table Harry could see that the Headmaster wasn't

there. Clicking his teeth he turned back to Ginny. "I'll see you later," he said, standing up and squeezing her hand affectionately, quickly. "Dumbledore's probably in his office."

"You'll be at dinner?" she asked.

Harry stood over and turned off the bench at the table. "Depends," he shrugged. "Fright might want to catch up on some missed curses that I... well... missed." Ginny nodded. "Tell Ron and Hermione I said 'Hi'."

"Will do."

Harry made his way up through the castle at a slight jog, not wanting to miss Dumbledore if he was there. As he went he thought about what he was going to say. He was going to apologise first, and then tell him about Marcus. No doubt some more serious topics would be breached, such as Harry's well being, but he'd cross that bridge if he came to it and didn't find it already burnt down.

"Canary Cream...." Harry sighed at the gargoyle guarding Dumbledore's office. Quickly he jumped on the ascending staircase and followed it around as it came to a stop. The oak doors before the study were closed and the torch on the wall flickered warmly. Taking a deep breath, Harry grasped the handle and pushed the door open.

The room was empty. Harry looked from Dumbledore's desk to all the odd trinkets littering the room and finally came to rest on Fawkes who greeted him warmly with a small note and a flap of his wings.

"Hello, Fawkes," Harry said with a smile, stepping into the room and across to the perch next to the Headmaster's desk, he stroked the phoenix's neck. "Is he here?"

Fawkes tilted his head and sung a low note. Harry frowned and looked around again, no one was there. With a heavy sigh he sat down in one of the chairs in front of the desk and strummed his fingers on its arm. He didn't know where Dumbledore was or how long he would be, but he'd give it a couple of minutes.

"How many times will you walk those steps, boy, bringing the weight of the world with you?"

Harry jumped in his seat and looked around quickly for the source of the voice. His eyes scanned the room sharply, from the fireplace to the stairs that led to the Headmaster's quarters. He finally gazed upwards and into the painted eyes of the portrait, of Phineas Nigellus.

"I'm sorry?" Harry replied, confused.

Phineas looked him up and down before finally sitting in the chair painted next to him. "Dumbledore isn't here," he said after a moment. "He has just flooed to the Ministry, he shouldn't be long." Harry nodded and, for lack of something to do, looked around the room again. "Something the matter?" Phineas asked.

Harry looked back up to the portrait. "No..." he answered with a shrug. "Not really."

"Not come to shout at the Headmaster again then?" Phineas said from his portrait, raising an eyebrow.

Harry bristled. "That has nothing to do with-

"He has done more than you could know," Phineas interrupted and several other portraits nodded but remained silent. "Has made more sacrifices than most... has suffered more than most."

Harry didn't say anything but kept his eye contact with the portrait of the previous Headmaster. After a long moment he did speak, and a shadow passed over his face as he did. "Don't speak to me about suffering..." he whispered dangerously.

Phineas scoffed in his portrait and Harry's eyes blazed with anger. He was about to argue but Phineas spoke first. "See that pile of parchment there, boy," he pointed to a small stack of parchment on Dumbledore's desk that was in arms reach of Harry. "Pick it up."

Harry frowned but with further prodding with Phineas, he did it. He picked up three of the leafs of parchment and looked them up and down. At the top of the first one the word 'Beauxbatons' was written and underlined. Beneath that was a list of names, several hundred long. Confused, Harry looked at the next two and it all became clear. The second piece had 'Hogsmeade' written at the top and the third 'Diagon

Alley'.

"These are list of all those that have died..." Harry said sadly, looking down at the endless names, his voice catching in his throat.

Phineas nodded solemnly. "Dumbledore has written hundreds of these lists in his life, more than anyone should ever have to. He carries the world in his pocket, and it would be a sorely darker place if not for him."

Harry reached over to the desk again and pulled another piece of parchment from the pile, this one from the bottom. It was an older piece and across the top was written 'Diagon Alley' again. This also had the year at 1979. His eyes grimly scanned the list of names.

"This is from the first war?" he asked quietly, with a confused note in his voice.

Phineas heard him. "Yes..." he replied, scraping the arm of his painted chair.

Harry frowned and past a hand through his hair, wrenching his eyes guilty from one parchment to the next. "But the names look the same..."

Phineas stood and sighed again. "They always do...."

Harry looked up at this but it was at that moment that the fireplace blazed to life in green flames. Harry quickly replaced the parchment on the desk as Dumbledore came spinning out of the flames. "Professor," he said, standing up and stepping forward.

"Harry?" Dumbledore said surprised, but then smiled welcomingly. "Is something the matter?"

"Nothing really..." Harry began. "I really came to apologise for..."

Dumbledore walked over to his desk, stroking Fawkes as he went. "Think nothing of it, Harry. We are all due our outbursts from time to time." The Headmaster was smiling.

Harry nodded. "Yeah... well I still want to say sorry. So... sorry."

"Apology accepted," Dumbledore said, seating himself behind his desk.

"Now I believe there may be something else you wish to discuss."

Harry frowned and for a moment didn't speak. A long minute passed before he remembered. "Oh... yeah. I've asked an armourer to come to the school tomorrow, to outfit the DA. I came to ask for your approval."

Dumbledore's blue eyes twinkled. "Yes. Marcus is an old friend of mine. We have been in correspondence for a few weeks now. I know he can be trusted, as can his staff."

Harry sat back down in his chair. "So I can owl him back then? For tomorrow?"

"Yes..." Dumbledore nodded and fell silent.

"How are things going?" Harry asked.

Dumbledore surveyed him for a moment before replying. When he did, it was in a distant, old voice that sounded deeply regretful. "An end is coming, Harry. Faster than any of us can imagine. I believe a key battle will soon be fought, and it is imperative that we win."

Harry nodded. "And you think it will be fought here. That's why the Auror army will be based nearby."

Dumbledore sighed and his eyes seemed to look past Harry and into the uncertain future, searching desperately for answers only Destiny herself knew. "Nothing is certain anymore, Harry. But I do believe Tom will attack here. To break Hogwarts will be to break the morale of our world."

"He won't do it," Harry said with a great conviction in his voice. "Hogwarts can withstand him."

Dumbledore merely smiled sadly and folded his old hands into his lap.

"You up for a trip, Hedwig?" Harry asked kindly as he entered the owlery.

His snowy white owl descended from a perch three quarters of the way up the room. She circled him on the way down before coming to a rest peacefully on his shoulder. With an affectionate peck of his ear, Hedwig

then stuck out her leg professionally for the letter.

Harry smiled genuinely. "Just a minute then," he said. Using the cheap quill and parchment provided, Harry wrote a quick note to Marcus Elendil. He confirmed everything from his letter and said he looked forward to seeing him again tomorrow. Once it was written Harry gave the ink a moment to dry and then folded and attached it to Hedwig's still outstretched leg.

A moment later and she flew out into the bright sky in a flurry of white feathers and Harry watched her until she fell over the horizon, and out of sight.

For the rest of that afternoon Harry continued to practice advanced magic in the Room of Requirement. He had no special lessons until three thirty, when he would be learning yet more curses with Thomas Fright. So Harry didn't want to waste the few hours before that, and spent it productively. He also enjoyed a brief flight around the room as a griffin.

With his ever growing magic inside of him, Harry had begun to see it more of something he would have to bend to his will. To him, it was like a flooded river, torrents of water gushing in an unstoppable force. His magic was that water and the river was his mind. The power of the river couldn't be stopped, but it could be redirected. In his days of training, Harry was slowly redirecting his magic to where he wanted it to be, to what he wanted it to be.

Harry assimilated all the curses he could with Thomas Fright and even used some lesser ones in a quick duel with the Auror trainer. Harry held his own against him and Thomas was deeply impressed. But duelling with Fright was quite different than duelling with Voldemort. For one, Fright wasn't trying to kill him. But it went deeper than that. Harry had duelled Voldemort and survived. When duelling the Dark Lord, Harry felt as if he knew Voldemort's next move and countered quickly. He and Voldemort shared a deep connection that gave them an understanding of each other's minds. They accurately anticipated one another's moves. It would be a challenge to over come that.

Harry didn't share such a connection with Fright, so duelling with him

was a surprise as he truly didn't know what to expect. It wasn't easy, though. Fright was an accomplished dueller, but then war had forced Harry to learn fairly fast the skills needed to defend himself. He soon bested Thomas Fright.

After Offensive and Defensive spells Harry had Pure Magic training with Minra Algren. This was a lesson he only had three times a week because it was primarily theory and acquiring knowledge. Minra taught him magical theory, which made spell work easier and increased his capacity for power. She taught him what little techniques there was known on controlling pure magic to its potential and even gave him some lessons in Occlumency, which helped Harry evolve his mind from a jumbled mess to an orderly field of trained skills. With a clear mind he could have free, clear access to all his spells in every separate arsenal he held for different branches of magic.

He also asked her to teach him concentration techniques in Occlumency because he wanted to keep Voldemort out of his mind when he slept. He would be able to learn faster and more efficiently if he didn't wake up tired. Minra's lessons were a lot more enlightening than Snape's though. She actually *taught* him how to do, and not force it upon him as the git of a Potions Master had done. In only a few lessons he had already learned more than Snape ever taught him.

Friday dawned and Harry was up and out of bed before five o'clock. After a quick shower he put on his clothes for the day and his dragon boots and chest piece. He wore a pair of blue jeans and a loose fitting black shirt over the chest armour and had Ethan's dagger in his boot sheath. He decided not to wear any robes that day, as he really couldn't be bothered with them.

After physical training with Siamus and Trask, Harry and Trask went to their spot on the grounds by the lake and practiced their art. Metal clanged on metal as slowly, but professionally Dernas taught Harry how better to use a sword. He had learned most of the basics with the wooden stick, but there were some things that could only be taught with the real thing. Skill was one of them, as he didn't want to face a swordsman with a wooden imitation.

Harry spent breakfast with his friends and nervously awaited the delivery owl with his copy of the *Prophet*. When it did arrive there was nothing overly devastating in the news. Construction had begun on Auror Headquarters out of Hogsmeade and two suspected Death Eaters had been caught and hurriedly sentenced to life in the French prison, Nabakza.

He also received a reply from Marcus with Hedwig. After giving her some bacon rinds and sending her off to the owlery, Harry read the letter and would meet Marcus and his staff in the Entrance Hall at six o'clock tonight. Dumbledore would be there as well, and then they would head up to the Room of Requirement. Since the DA was so big now, with over one hundred members, the fake galleons were no longer in use. It was widely known throughout the school that Harry Potter was the head of a defence club, and that the club now had regular meetings.

For the rest of that day, Harry waited for the DA meeting to roll around. He spent some time with Rose practicing Thought magic and also with Grace learning some healing charms.

Since the Hogsmeade attack just over two weeks ago, Harry had dedicated himself to learning more offensive spells he could use in a duel. He didn't want to rely on the Stunning spell or Disarming charm anymore than he had to. He had taken to learning at least three new curses everyday. His lessons with Thomas Fright helped him achieve that, and now barely two weeks on, Harry had knowledge of several more deadly curses at his disposal. Dozens in fact, the least of all being a bone breaking hex.

As promised and arranged, that night Marcus and his employees arrived. Harry and Dumbledore were talking quietly in the Entrance Hall, as the rest of the school was a stone's throw away in the Great hall enjoying dinner, when he and his staff entered. Marcus was just as giant as Harry remembered him to be, but his smiling face showed him to be the gentle man he was. His staff were good natured as well and all of them were very happy to meet Harry. There were five witches and four wizards. Harry only remembered a few of their names, though.

After the introductions were over, Harry fell in line next to Dumbledore as

they headed towards the Room of Requirement. Marcus and Dumbledore talked like old friends would and when they were about halfway to the room Harry struck up a conversation with one of the witches who had come with Marcus.

He offered to carry her bags and she smiled her thanks and reintroduced herself as Melissa, Marcus' niece. She worked for her uncle and was more than happy to help out Harry and the DA. Melissa was seven years out of Hogwarts and now twenty four. She was very forward and asked Harry a lot of questions about the rumours she had heard. This slowed them down somewhat and they fell back to the rear of the group.

"It is really an honour to be meeting you," Melissa said, awe in her voice.

Harry smiled. "I'm no one special..." he said, not entirely truthfully. He really didn't like his fame.

Melissa never missed a beat. "I mean we've all heard about you over the years but its nothing like meeting you in person."

"How so?" Harry asked with a frown, lifting her bag over his shoulder.

"Just being around you," she whispered. "I mean I can feel the power radiating from you! It's very *cool*."

"It is, huh?" Harry said matter of fact, shrugging his shoulders.

"You hear stories in the papers and everything," she persisted. "And I know now most of them are probably true, just from meeting you."

"What stories?" Harry asked. There were so many it as hard to keep track.

Melissa shrugged. "You defended the Ministry against You-Know-Who last June."

"It wasn't just me," Harry said thinking of Sirius.

"You were at those attacks in Abingdon and Hogsmeade and you duelled with You-Know-Who."

Harry nodded. "I was there. I did duel with Voldemort."

She flinched at his name but didn't want to lose her chance to find out more about The Boy Who Lived. "Some of the rumours I hear are a bit far-fetched though," she said with a grin. "You know there's a rumour that you actually killed a Basilisk after it bit you."

"Is there?" Harry said gently with a smile as they came to, and entered, the Room of Requirement.

After an hour in which Dumbledore departed on Headmaster business and Harry got to know Marcus and his staff better, the DA started to arrive. They came in groups of friends up from dinner, and after about quarter of an hour, all one hundred and five members were present.

Harry got up and welcomed them all, and announced that Marcus and his staff, whose presence in the back of the room had not gone unnoticed, were going to measure and fit everyone for a full set of dragon armour.

"We're going to need groups of ten, then," Harry said to the group. "Sort yourselves out and then please see Mr. Elendil and his staff up at the back. There's no need to rush, we have a few hours for this."

The DA began to break away into groups and Marcus and his staff moved forward, taking out tape measures and order forms from the bags they had brought as they went.

Ginny moved over towards him through the crowds of black robed Hogwarts students as they sorted themselves into groups, mostly corresponding to their own house. Harry saw her coming and smiled warmly and happily when she lightly brushed her hand against his.

"How've you been?" Harry asked as they required armchairs to sit in.

"Fine. Long day of potions, though. OWLs are coming fast now...." she sighed.

Harry laughed. "I won't say they're not bad because, well, they *are*. But you'll do fine. Study hard enough and you could beat Hermione's perfect score."

Ginny laughed and pushed her back behind her shoulders where it had come loose. "How can you beat a *perfect* score?"

Harry frowned in thought. "Er... well. You can't, but you can equal it."

Ginny seemed to think for a moment. "You think I can?"

"I know you can."

She smiled. "Thanks, Harry." After that she hugged him quickly before going to join the group of Gryffindors that had lined up next to Melissa. Ron and Hermione were in that line, as were Neville and Luna.

It took the majority of the meeting to get down everybody's size and order and it was almost nine o'clock when the last of the Ravenclaws were done. Marcus and his staff packed up all of their information and were waiting patiently at the back of the room again. Harry gave the DA a minute to get seated again before he spoke.

"Well that's that," he said after it grew quiet. "I'm afraid that's the meeting over for tonight. It's just turned nine o'clock so Filch will be on the prowl. Next meeting will be Monday, when we can get down to some more practical work. So... until then, goodbye."

The members of the DA began to filter out of the room, some came and said goodbye to Harry and others thanked Marcus, Melissa, and the rest for their time. Eventually it was only Harry, Ginny, Ron, Hermione, Neville, and Luna left with the armourers.

"Well for an order this big I'd say it is going to take at least two weeks to get it all in, March 14th at the earliest," Marcus said with a quill and parchment in his hands, doing some quick calculations. "And at one thousand, two hundred and fifty galleons per head, that'll be...." he grew silent for a moment and his quill scraped across his parchment. Half a minute later and Marcus let out a low whistle, as if he knew this was the moment he would lose the order. "That'll be one hundred and thirty one thousand, two hundred and fifty galleons."

Harry just nodded. "I'll get on to Gringotts," he said. "Do you have a vault number?"

Marcus and Melissa smiled very happily and the rest of the staff seemed in good spirits as well. "Number forty two," he said, scribbling something on the parchment and then tearing that section off. He handed it to Harry. It was his bank details.

After saying their goodbyes, Harry walked with Marcus and Melissa to the Entrance Hall. The rest of the staff had already gone on ahead and his friends had returned to the common room. "How you getting home?" Harry asked outside on the stairs at the castle entrance.

"Floo from The Three Broomsticks, now it's open for business again," Melissa said as Marcus shrunk their bags and placed them in his pocket.

"Not so sure it's safe to be walking down Hogsmeade Road this late at night," Harry said with a frown. He was more concerned for Melissa than Marcus, as Marcus was a giant of him. "I'm sure Dumbledore...."

"S'all right, Harry," Melissa replied. "There are Aurors right up and down the streets and on the road to Hogsmeade. They're overseeing the construction of that Army of Light Headquarters."

Harry nodded. "OK," Harry shrugged. "I'll see you in two weeks time then."

Walking back up through the castle alone, Harry thought about the construction of the Auror Headquarters. It was either going to attract Voldemort here, or keep him away until his forces grew. It was a chance either way, but Harry dreaded the former. In a full blown attack on Hogwarts, a lot could happen then. A lot of innocents could die. Harry no longer considered himself innocent in this war, if he really thought about it he hadn't considered himself that since Cedric had been murdered. He had taken life in his battles, and in doing that he had saved some poor soul a painful death... hadn't he?

Harry shook his head and headed up a flight of stairs. It was just as he reached the top step and walked onto the new floor, that he heard quick footsteps behind him. He turned sharply, palm already tingling with magic. There was no one there, just darkness and shadows from the soft glowing torchlight.

"Who's there?" Harry called. He hadn't expected a response and didn't get one, so with a shrug he turned and carried on walking. He walked faster now, if he was being followed he hoped to lose whoever it was. He stepped up to another floor and down the hall, turned the corner and-

"Harry," Ginny said happily. "I was just coming to see what was keeping you."

Harry nodded and then looked quickly behind himself, back once more into the shadows that flickered across the walls, and the brief starlight that shone in through the windows.

"What is it?" she asked, looking for herself.

Harry shrugged and then turned to face her. "I thought I heard...." he began. "Nothing. You found me then," he smiled.

Ginny nodded with a grin and put her arms around his neck and embraced him properly, as she had been unable to do in front of the DA. He leaned back and caught her lips briefly in his own, just for a moment. "I missed you all week," he said. "Couldn't get five minutes alone to talk."

Ginny laughed and let out a frustrated sigh. "You got five minutes now?"

Harry tapped his foot and then made a spectacle of looking at his watch. "Well... I dunno?" he joked and then he made to escape her arms around his neck but Ginny was having none of it.

"Oh no you don't, Potter," she grinned and then pulled him over to a window ledge that looked out over the castle grounds, towards Hogsmeade and the distant mountain in the distance that guarded over the magical graveyard. They both sat down, close to each other on the small ledge and looked out at the world.

They were both hidden partially in the shadows, and for a few minutes they talked lovingly to one another, like they couldn't around anybody else, for fear of being discovered. That was a storm that Harry didn't want to break, because there may be no coming back from it.

Harry blinked to clear away those thoughts, though, because he didn't want to think about losing Ginny. He looked out towards the Forbidden

forest and then the Hogsmeade road. He could see two pinpricks of light slowly moving down the road. He assumed they were the light from Marcus and Melissa's wands.

He turned back to Ginny and looked deep into her eyes, searching for comfort there. He found it. "I think that's five minutes, Ginny," he whispered as she put her head on his shoulder, her arms still around her neck. "Any longer and we'll be missed."

"Let us be missed then," she sighed happily, but pulled herself up anyway.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Just thinking," she replied.

"About?"

"...about You-Know-Who...."

Harry sighed and his eyes narrowed angrily. "Ah! *Him...*" he said bitterly. "What are you thinking about him for?"

Ginny folded her hands in her lap. "It seems that's all everyone thinks about these days," she said regretfully.

Harry really didn't know what to say. He could see that Ginny was slightly fearful at the moment, and it was well founded, but he still wasn't sure how to react. Comfort wasn't something he was particularly good at, as it had been lacking for most of his life. "It will get better one day, Gin," he managed after a moment.

"But when?" she asked, sounding slightly desperate with a shake to her voice. "How long will we have to hide in the shadows? How long will we have to worry about the people we love? How long will good people die needlessly?" Ginny had worked up quite a steam now, but her voice was a whisper as she came to her final point. "How long will you have to suffer, Harry?"

Harry wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close. "For as long as it takes," he said simply. "For as long as it takes...."

Several feet down the hall, hidden in the darkness, stood a tall blonde Slytherin. Harry's shadow from the floor below, the source of the mysterious footsteps. He watched Potter hold Weasley as she cried slightly, then he watched the two of them stand. Potter kissed her deeply before they walked away and out of sight.

The smirk on Draco Malfoy's face was one of glee. *This is interesting* he thought to himself. *This is very interesting...* Barely making a sound, Malfoy turned and headed in the direction of the owlery. Finally he had some information, some information that could make him worthy of the Dark Mark.

Chapter 28 - It Will All Be Over Soon

Only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go.

~~T.S. Elliot

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Twenty Days Later,

20 March 1997

Harry surveyed the strewn landscape of the vast world around him. A lot had happened in the last two weeks, too much. He looked out upon the Forbidden Forest and past that to Hogsmeade. Standing atop of the Astronomy tower, Harry watched the destruction unfold.

How did it come to this? he wondered briefly, as hundreds of Aurors poured out of the recently constructed Army Headquarters, rushing to meet their fate. Rushing to face their deaths, to stare their mortality in the eye and have it claim them. What unstoppable chain of events was put into motion to bring Harry to this one point in time, where the fate of the free world rested on an unparalleled victory? He had come a long way in six years.

Explosions and great balls of blue fire shot up from the village under siege, Hogsmeade. Only recently rebuilt, it was now the stage for the fiercest battle fought since the Wizard involvement in the Muggle World War.

A fortnight was all it had taken.

Both sides, Light and Dark, had been arming themselves rapidly for two weeks and now a major battle on a global scale would decide who would take the advantage in this war. Harry looked down to Hagrid's cabin and saw the half-giant himself rushing some third years up to the castle.

The sky was tanned a deep orange as the sun began to slowly set behind the castle. Massive streaks of cloud tore across the sky and storm clouds in the distance threatened rain. Nature itself was preparing for death. After a final look at Hogsmeade, Harry felt an all too familiar twinge of pain in his scar. It had now truly begun. Voldemort was close.

Bugger, Harry sighed to himself. *It's show time...*

Across the grounds and down on the well trodden road that connected the school to the village, Harry saw hundreds of Dementors appear out of the darkness under the eaves of the forest. The Army of Light, hardened Aurors, did not falter. Dozens of Patroni appeared like a wave of silver, and began to beat back the creatures of evil. Another twinge of pain in his scar and this time Harry was worried. Something had happened, something more important to him than the outcome of this

battle. Harry knew the Death Eaters were in Hogsmeade, but was Voldemort himself there? He could not be sure.

"Oh well...." he whispered regretfully. "It has come to this...."

As darkness began to fall, Harry thought briefly back to the events that had brought him here, to the edge of war. The events of the last two weeks, when he looked back upon it, could not have prevented the coming struggle. Nothing could have....

Two Weeks Earlier

6 March 1997

Harry tossed and turned in his bed, dreams and nightmares of circles of light haunting his mind. The dream had been a constant for months now. A glowing circle that radiated power even in his dreams. Firenze had warned him against it, to stay away from it. He had said death followed it, but it followed Harry as well.

That morning Harry once again fell into his routine. He was out the castle by five o'clock, exercising with Siamus and Dermas. After that he had some brief sword training with Dermas, before heading up to the Great Hall for breakfast. The world was still holding its breath before the big plunge. Report after report of Dark wizards flocking to Voldemort filled the war section of the *Daily Prophet*, along with more morale raising news such as the construction of the Army of Light Headquarters.

Over the past six days, magical contractors had worked on building and enforcing the Auror base. They had first had to clear a large portion of the forest, the side closer to Hogsmeade, and then it was all down to some clever spell work. It had taken three solid days of magic and Harry saw some of it in the early mornings as reds and blues lit up the sky.

One hundred and sixty Aurors had already taken up station there. They were British Aurors and many were veterans of the First Dark War. It had been on the fifth of the month that Aurors from France began to arrive in squads of twenty. As of the morning of the 6th, three hundred and forty Aurors called the Headquarters home.

Hermione's parents had also finally returned to their lives, after spending two months at the castle. Just as Harry had promised, he had become their Secret Keeper. Voldemort could not find them at their practice in Abingdon. Hermione had thanked Harry many times and had broken down in tears when her parents had finally flooed from Dumbledore's office. Hermione had wanted to go as well, but it was deemed too dangerous, as she was not protected by the charm.

Mr. and Mrs. Granger had made her promise to write everyday and to stay out of the war as much as possible. They had also said goodbye to Harry and Ron, and had wished Harry the best of luck no matter what happened in the future. It was a teary farewell for Hermione, but Harry and Ron remained stoic.

Harry finished his breakfast and for a few minutes chatted happily with his friends. Hermione and Ron told him that Dumbledore had cancelled all Hogsmeade weekends until further notice and that the Quidditch match between Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff had also been cancelled. His reasoning was that it was simply too dangerous to have large numbers of students outside the safety of the castle. He had made these announcements at dinner last night, but Harry had missed them due to some extra training.

For the three and a half hours before lunch, Harry learned more curses and shield charms with Thomas Fright. He now had a range of shields at his disposal, and had learned to control the one his pure magic put up subconsciously. Shields of such strength that they could deflect multiple spells and defend against non-magical means of attack, such as a shot from a bow.

Lunch was a short affair, after which he had Magical Tuning, followed by Charms and Healing, and finally Pure Magic training. He was progressing excellently in Charms and Healing, as he could now successfully charm a small statue to defend him against magical attack, namely spells that couldn't be blocked with a shield, such as the Killing Curse.

He stumbled into the common room at eight o'clock, after a quick visit to the kitchens, and fell into his favourite armchair. Ron and Hermione

were seated together in another opposite him, embraced as they read from the same book. Hermione took one look at Harry and immediately her face filled with concern.

"You look awful, Harry," she said nervously. "Have you had a...." she lowered her voice considerably. "*vision*?"

Ron chuckled. "I think he's just tired. Am I right, Harry?"

"Knackered..." Harry mumbled, pressing his cold hand against his scorching forehead. His scar was always hot these days, not always painful, but definitely hot.

"We've not had much chance to talk lately," Hermione said sadly, looking into the roaring fire. "Only at breakfast and lunch really...."

"Yeah..." agreed Ron. "What have you been up to, Harry? How's your training coming along."

Harry thought back through the previous weeks and tried to remember the last real conversation he had with his friends. He supposed it was the day he first kissed Ginny up on top of the tower, when he had shown them his Animagus transfiguration in the Room of Requirement. "Training's coming along fine," he said after a moments thought. "I'll teach some of the more useful curses to the DA."

"Have you heard from Marcus?" asked Ron as a bunch of fifth year girls came down the stairs that led to their dorms, Ginny among them.

Harry watched her for a moment and they both exchanged a small smile that wasn't lost on Hermione. "No..." Harry said, drawing his attention back to his best friends. "But I don't expect to until about the fifteenth."

"Have you heard anything from Dumbledore about.... anything?" asked Hermione, staring at him pointedly.

Harry shrugged, throwing a spare piece of parchment from his pocket into the fire. "Nothing that isn't in the papers," he said. "And the Occlumency techniques Minra's teaching me are keeping Voldemort out of my head."

"So they're still wondering if You-Know-Who will attack Hogwarts?" Ron said, a nervous edge to his voice.

Harry sighed. "It's not a question of *if*. It's a question of *when*...."

Harry slept sparingly that night. Images of the destruction caused by Voldemort did not haunt his dreams, thanks to his skills in Occlumency. It was not perfect but it worked. His dreams were still plagued by a circle of light though and, try as he might, he couldn't rid himself of them.

8 March 1997

The Lost Manor House of Salazar Slytherin

Peter Pettigrew approached the blood red door nervously. He had been summoned by his Master only once in the past two months, so he knew now that he was either needed for a task or he was being punished for something inconceivable. Wormtail thought hard, but could not think of one thing he had done that would result in punishment. So he was needed for a task.

He shuddered at that thought. *Why me?* he wondered. It was well known that the ranks of the Death Eaters numbered over five hundred now, with all the foreign Dark wizards that were answering Voldemort's call. Why call Wormtail, when so many others were so desperate to prove their worth.

Suppressing another shudder, Wormtail rapped on the oak door three times with his silver hand. A second later the door opened of its own volition, and a blast of cold air rushed out to meet Wormtail, complete with the rattling sound that could be vaguely recognised as a sucking breath.

"Enter, Wormtail...." hissed a cold, merciless voice from within the darkness of the room.

As bravely as he could, Peter took four nervous steps into the darkness. The door closed ominously behind him without making a sound, and a single solitary torch sprang to life eight feet away. Its light paled against

the amount of pure evil that festered within this room. The blast of cold air hit Peter again, and it was at that moment he knew there were creatures in here besides himself and his Master.

"Where are your manners, Wormtail?" that same voice hissed again.

Wormtail jumped and looked towards the pale light half a dozen feet away. He could just make out two merciless red eyes piercing through him beneath it. His Master was seated beneath the light. Remembering his place, Wormtail fell to the floor and bowed low. The sucking sound increased dramatically as more torches flared to life.

Wormtail whimpered slightly, as half a dozen Dementors were revealed to him. Three stood either side of Voldemort and seemed to keep a fair distance from him. The cold hit him again and he began to hear the worst memories of his life. He remembered the day he had blown up the Muggle street, sentencing Sirius to over a decade in Azkaban. He remembered the confrontation in the Shrieking Shack and he remembered his Master's rebirth.

A long, cold silence fell as Wormtail stared at the hem of Voldemort's robes, not daring to make eye contact unless asked. He could see and hear the Dementors though, and was always surprised at their behaviour towards Voldemort. Throughout his entire life he had feared Dementors, as all magical folk did, but the Dementors themselves seemed afraid of Voldemort.

They never approached him unless asked, and their powers did not affect him. Peter could not begin to imagine what type of power Voldemort held if he could inspire fear into a Dementor.

Taking a deep breath, Peter spoke. "You summoned me, my Lord?"

"Indeed, Wormtail," Voldemort said, his voice a low whisper that was as cold as the Dementors themselves. "An opportunity has presented itself...."

Wormtail raised his head slightly. "Y-Yes, my Lord. I live to serve you..."

Voldemort smiled. "I know you do, Wormtail...." Another silence, this one accompanied by a particular bad memory. Wormtail remembered the

pain from cutting off his own hand. "Now, as I said. We have a singular opportunity. One of my sources has informed me that Mr. Potter may not be as untouchable as he appears."

Wormtail inwardly sighed. "Really, my Lord...." he said with as much courage as he could muster. It was really cold.

"Lucius' son has discovered that Potter's weakness may be his heart. He has become involved with Ginevra Weasley. The young girl who was unfortunate enough to run into my old school diary..."

"I remember," Wormtail stammered. "My Lord," he added quickly, almost forgetting his place.

"The plans for the Vernal Equinox need to be changed..." Voldemort hissed. "We will still use the ancient magic discovered at Stonehenge, but we will use it against Potter... against his heart."

Wormtail nodded but, with every fibre of courage he possessed, voiced his concerns. "But, my Lord," he began. "We have no idea how the time and space magic will react once summoned... it may help Potter."

Voldemort laughed. "*You* have no idea how the magic will work, Wormtail. I have a few theories...."

Not wanting to push his luck any further, Wormtail agreed. "What task do you require of me, my Lord?"

The room was really cold now. Several of the torches had already flickered and died as the Dementors fed off of Wormtail. "Master Malfoy has proven his usefulness, as you once did," Voldemort began. "You will aid him in his first task."

"What will that be, my Lord?" he questioned, but regretted it an instant later when he saw the flash of annoyance pass across Voldemort's face.

Voldemort did not answer for a long moment, his eyes piercing into Peter and then the Dementors in turn. The Dementors let out a cry as Voldemort looked at them, and Peter shuddered. "You will crush Potter's heart..." Voldemort answered cryptically, sadistically.

10 March 1997

The Army of Light Headquarters

Kingsley Shacklebolt surveyed the empty hall in front of him. He was standing on a balcony above a gigantic, empty hall that was easily twice the size of the Great Hall at Hogwarts. It was the rally point for the Army of Light. This was where all eight hundred or so Aurors would assemble in times of need.

Right now all the Aurors at Headquarters were asleep in the dormitories three hundred feet away. All except Tonks, who would now be making her way up to the castle for the Order meeting. Kingsley sighed and wondered briefly how he had made it here. He was the commander of all the Aurors at this base. He was in control of eight hundred fully trained Aurors, who had come from half a dozen Ministries.

Seeing as the base was officially under United Kingdom control, Minister Weasley had seen to it that Kingsley was in a position of power, enabling the Order to stay informed of how the base was run. Under him served lieutenants appointed by the Aurors from every Ministry that was represented there. But overall he only answered to Arthur Weasley and Albus Dumbledore.

It was also his job to devise battle tactics based on the previous attacks by Voldemort. Kingsley would decide who to send and where. The United Kingdom was being overrun by Dark wizards, hundreds of them having been reported missing throughout the world, and it didn't require too much thought to realise to whom they had flocked.

His job was not easy. His choices would probably get good men killed, but they were the best he could make. There could be no victory without sacrifice. Kingsley had learned long ago that those who do not fight can still be cut down. That is why he had become an Auror.

Rubbing his tired eyes, Kingsley looked down again at the empty hall. Nothing but darkness and silence met his eyes. His watch told him it was ten o'clock. The Order meeting began in half an hour. It was time to go.

With a sigh he Disapparated to the castle gates, thinking all along about the seventy-five Aurors arriving from Canada tomorrow. They were mostly trained in defence so they would be best used in guarding the base or maybe Hogwarts.

I'll decide their fates later he thought, passing through the wards of the castle.

11 March 1997

The Hogwarts Staff Room

Minerva McGonagall walked with a slight limp into the Staff Room. Ever since that stunner attack last year she hadn't been her best, and likely never would be again. She kept it well hidden of course, but her knee would probably trouble her for the rest of her life, however long that would be.

No one ever saw her limp, ever saw her wince from time to time, but that was how she preferred it. Albus knew of course, but there was nothing that man didn't know. Not much anyway.

With a heavy sigh she sat down in the one armchair by the fire she had grown accustomed to using over the years. After unfolding the *Daily Prophet* she conjured some tea and relaxed after a long day of teaching. While perusing the war section, as most did these days, Minerva found her mind slipping to her Gryffindors.

They were rash, brave and loyal to a fault. She couldn't name a bad one amongst the current bunch. Several had made mistakes in the past that had cost others dearly, too dearly, but the majority had always chosen the Light. Thinking back through the years, McGonagall remembered the better of her students, the ones who went on to change the world for the good, and those who never had the chance to. James and Lily to name two.

Minerva put the *Prophet* aside and removed her reading glasses. Looking into the fire, her eyes glazed over with unshed tears as she remembered the trouble James Potter used to get in to, usually with

Sirius Black in tow. You never saw one without the other. *Both are dead now* she thought sadly, not for the first time.

Forcing herself to remember the better times, Minerva silently laughed as she remembered the time James had stuck one thousand photos of Sirius sleeping with a Muggle doll on every seat in the Great Hall. Sirius had come in late to breakfast and it had taken him roughly five seconds to realise what was going on, but James had used those five seconds well, escaping through the anteroom and out onto the grounds. Yes, always in trouble....

Thinking of James made McGonagall think of Harry. A shadow passed over her face as she thought of all the hardship that young man had faced. He was just like his father, always getting into trouble. Harry's trouble was a lot more serious though, and it sometimes shook the foundations of magic itself. He was gifted, touched by a higher power, that much was clear. He would change the world one day. Whether he lives or dies he will decide the fate of the magical community, and most likely the Muggle world as well.

"Is everything alright, Minerva?" asked a familiar voice.

McGonagall jumped slightly in her chair. "Hmm... Oh. Yes, yes everything is fine, Severus," she managed, replacing her strict, serious exterior. "Just thinking about young Harry."

A sneer appeared on Snape's face as he sat opposite his once Transfiguration teacher. Putting his arms inside his robes, Snape spoke. "That boy is more trouble than he's worth. Just like his father..."

McGonagall bristled, feeling the urge to defend her Gryffindor. "You know as well as I do our hope lies with him."

"That is what worries me, Minerva," he replied predictably.

McGonagall sighed. "Come now, Severus. Harry is not James. He is a lot more selfless."

"A lot more foolish," Snape grumbled. "His selflessness will be his undoing."

Placing the sternest expression she could muster on her face, Minerva spoke again, looking directly into Snape's eyes. "His selflessness is highly admirable. It has kept him alive this far, who's to say it won't see him through."

Snape didn't let McGonagall's expression bother him. After spending years lying under the gaze of Voldemort, she could not intimidate him. "Just an observation...." he muttered while pouring himself a glass of Firewhiskey from the liquor cabinet beside his chair.

"You give him too little credit, Severus," Minerva said matter of factly. "He has saved us all more than once."

"Not all of us," Snape whispered, sipping his drink. "His mongrel godfather fell because of him."

McGonagall almost gasped in shock. Sirius Black was.... "Do not speak ill of the dead, Severus," she said dangerously.

"I apologise," he said none too sincerely, draining his glass. A moment of silence followed that was soon broken as Snape dropped his glass, which shattered on the hearth. Biting back a curse, Snape grasped his left forearm. Minerva remained silent through this, knowing Severus did not want pity or help.

A few minutes passed and finally Snape released his arm. With a quick look to McGonagall he nodded and then stood. "I must go," he whispered.

13 March 1997

The International Confederation

"Our intelligence indicates that He Who Must Not Be Named has amassed an army of over six hundred, with more joining him everyday," shouted the Ambassador of Luxembourg angrily. "Britain's inability to protect itself has caused this simple conflict to grow into a war involving the entire world."

Shouts of agreement and denial ran out throughout the hall as those who agreed with the Luxembourg ambassador and those who didn't argued. Albus Dumbledore remained seated as this unfolded, too old to argue with the narrow-minded youth. He knew he would have to eventually, but for now let them have their arguments. The arguments only masked the real problem for one brief moment.

After ten minutes and much more bickering Dumbledore finally rose from his seat, a look on his face that brought the notice of all in the room and they fell quiet. Dumbledore was an experienced orator. He knew how to sway crowds to his way of thinking. The decades had taught him the subtle art of persuasion.

Clearing his throat, Albus spoke. "Britain stood on her own for as long as she could. We were willing to stand longer, but those among you who saw Voldemort for the threat that he is helped us, and for that we thank you." His eyes swept over the mass of people assembled here, a few familiar faces jumped out to meet him and he nodded to those. "Without help, I'm sorry to say, the British Ministry may have fallen. And then any of you would have been next," Dumbledore said deeply, no twinkle in his eyes. "Not to unite when we did would have been the gravest mistake our world could have made."

Most likely to save face, the Luxembourg ambassador spoke up again. "There is no proof You-Know-Who cannot be defeated by a determined attack. If you had struck earlier, the problem would not exist."

Dumbledore frowned, showing his disapproval. "Tell me, Mr. Ambassador, how much power do you believe one must possess to destroy the wards around a magical school? How much power would have been needed to destroy Beauxbatons academy?"

The ambassador stuttered but quickly defended himself. "A determined siege could destroy any wards on this earth."

Dumbledore sighed. "But this was not a siege. Voldemort broke those wards within hours. A feat even I would struggle to match," he said calmly as every voice in the room fell silent. It was a mark of respect to Dumbledore, who was widely known as the most powerful wizard in existence. Sighing again, Dumbledore continued. "None of you have to

help us further," he said. "Those brave enough to fight will do so alone, but this will not be forgotten."

"YOU THREAT-" began the Luxembourg ambassador, but was stopped by his associates quickly.

Dumbledore stood tall, and held the moment until he had the attention of the entire congregation. "We are about to enter the darkest stage of this war. Know that soon, hundreds will die. It is unavoidable," he began sadly, but strongly. "The most decisive battle in this war will be fought within weeks, maybe even days.... Britain may fall." The silence in the room was now absolute, not a whisper was heard as Dumbledore spoke one final time. "Remember your choices here today," he said, "for they decide our future."

15 March 1997

Defence Association Meeting, The Room of Requirement

"I owed Gringotts with all the details," Harry said. "The transfer went through three days ago."

"So it did, Mr. Potter," agreed Marcus Elendil. "I want to thank you for your business again. This is the largest order I've ever had to fill."

Harry nodded and sat back into a comfortable purple armchair. He looked over the one hundred brown paper packages that Marcus had just enlarged from within his trunk, sitting five to a stack on several tables against the back wall. "That's excellent," he replied, turning to look at Marcus. "The meeting doesn't start for an hour, but you're welcome to stay if you like. I'm sure they'd want to thank you."

Marcus laughed slightly. "No thanks," he began. "Dumbledore wants a word with me," he said as he pulled out a pocket watch. "And if I don't get going I'm going to be late," he ended with another small laugh.

Harry stood and extended his right hand to Marcus, who shook it promptly. "See you later then," he said, and then turned away towards the fire as Marcus exited the room.

Staring into the flames, Harry thought back to all the training he had been doing the past week. It had definitely not been easy. His teachers had seen fit to push him particularly hard over the last seven days. None more so than Derris, who had almost severed Harry's hand. It wasn't until afterwards that Derris had told him that he had a magical safe edge surrounding his blade. Thomas Fright had demanded a demonstration of all the curses he had taught him to date. Thanks to the mind-sorting Occlumency techniques that Minerva had been teaching him, Harry had been able to recall and successfully use all the curses the ex-Auror had taught him, and even throw in a few new ones Fright had not known about.

Though as the flames flickered and sent off small sparks onto the rug at its base, Harry couldn't help but think that he would be using his new skills soon, very soon. He didn't know when or where, but that basic instinct that had helped him all throughout this year was telling him to be ready. The dam could no longer hold back the flood. An end was coming.

Harry's thoughts were so deep he neither heard the door slowly opening, nor did he hear it click shut ever so quietly. The quiet footsteps on the stone floor went unnoticed and it wasn't until two hands fell before his eyes, that Harry realised someone was there.

"Guess who?" whispered a sweet voice in his ear.

Harry smiled. "Hello, Ginny. Sneak out of dinner early?"

"Dinner's over, Harry," she laughed, twirling around him and sitting down into the purple armchair. "I rushed up here quickly so we could have five minutes."

Harry nodded and required the armchair to extend slightly, so he could squeeze in next to her. He felt a small fluttering in his stomach as his leg brushed hers, but he simply smiled. "It seems we only ever get five minutes..." he whispered.

Ginny nodded. "How's your day been?" she asked.

Harry flexed his bruised wrist. "Long," he mumbled honestly. "Been up since four."

"Why?" she asked quickly.

"I hate sleeping," he whispered, placing his head on her shoulder.

Ginny ran a hand through his ever-scruffy hair and sighed. "Did you read the *Prophet*?"

"Hmm... Fifty Aurors from Switzerland. That brings the total up to about eight hundred at the Headquarters."

Ginny didn't say anything for a moment, but she did keep running a hand through his hair. "Do you think that will be enough if You-Know-Who attacks?"

Harry shrugged. "Voldemort's no fool..." he said matter of fact. "But we can't know how many Death Eaters he has... so we can't know if six hundred Aurors is enough?"

Ginny opened her mouth to speak again, but unfortunately at that moment the door to the room once again clicked open and creaked on its hinges. Not missing a beat, Ginny jumped quickly out of the chair and separated herself from Harry, giving him a silent apology as she went.

"It's okay," he whispered as half a dozen Hufflepuffs entered, Zacharias Smith among them.

Over the next ten minutes more and more members arrived, all of them noticing the dozens of brown packages stacked against the back wall on the small tables. Each of them had a small tag attached complete with a name. After a good fifteen minutes all were present, and Ron, Hermione, Neville, Ginny and Luna took their places up the back of the room, ready to hand out the armour packages.

"Right," began Harry once everyone was seated. "Welcome again to the DA. First things first tonight, Dragon Armour."

17 March 1997

The Outskirts of Hogsmeade

Three silent figures appeared in the darkness under the shadow of the forest that bordered the sleepy village of Hogsmeade. Dressed entirely in black flowing robes and masked in white, the figures were invisible as the moonlight was hidden behind dark storm clouds.

One of the three figures, whose mask was different from the others, stepped forward and raised his wand sharply. From behind his red mask two grey eyes sparkled malevolently as he whispered dark incantations that made the tip of his wand glow a pale blue.

After a long, silent moment the tip turned green, and then red. "Unforgivable detector," hissed Lucius Malfoy. "Most likely cast by Dumbledore..." One of the other two figures wrote quickly on a piece of parchment, documenting everything Malfoy said. "Dark detectors... three, four, and seven set within the village. Not very strong...."

Malfoy's wand swirled in the darkness, the tip turning a range of different colours. Reds, greens and blues all melded into one. "Shield charms set to activate in an emergency, surrounding all the buildings on the High Street." Falling silent again the wand tip turned a dark green. "Hmm... Unknown ward, definitely Dumbledore's signature. This one may be a problem."

"We should report this to our Master," whispered the second robed figure behind Malfoy.

Lucius Malfoy scoffed. "Of course we should," he drawled and then sighed. "Your business is done for this evening. Leave the parchment and Apparate to your homes."

Two small pops and Malfoy stood alone, looking down upon the sleeping village. The faint glow of torchlight was the only illumination that gave away the town's position. Scoffing with contempt, Malfoy looked past the village and up to the castle of Hogwarts. *Too long has that Mudblood loving fool resided there* he thought. *Power will change hands.* Even now his son was loyally assisting the proper master of the school. Everything will change. Come the Equinox everything will change....

18 March 1997

The log by the lake

Harry sat down and let out a long held breath. Trask sat next to him a moment later, his characteristic smile still plastered on his face. The pale light of dawn fell all around them as the sun rose over the distant mountain, giving light to the dawn of yet another day.

Having just completed their sword training for that day, Harry returned Gryffindor's sword to its hiding place with a thought, just out of sight. As they both tried to catch their breath neither spoke, and the world grew lighter around them. Several minutes passed in silence until it was broken by a familiar screech. Looking into the sky, Harry saw Hedwig soar down gracefully, flying over Trask's head and coming to a soft stop on Harry's shoulder.

Looking for a letter but not really expecting one, Harry stroked her neck. "How are you, girl?" he asked gently, as she pecked his ear affectionately. Hedwig had been visiting more and more often over the past week. Not to deliver mail, but to be close to him. She seemed agitated whenever she left him and always liked to be close. She hadn't left him alone all day on Sunday and had stayed close yesterday as he trained. It was very odd and uncharacteristic behaviour, but most welcome.

"Owl won't leave you alone," laughed Dernas.

"No..." Harry frowned. "Does she seem on edge to you?"

Trask shrugged. "On edge? Not really. Seems to be starved for attention though," he joked.

"Sod off," Harry replied quickly.

Dernas simply laughed but then fell silent as a cool breeze blew in over the lake. "It's not going to be long now," he whispered.

"What's that?" asked Harry, moving Hedwig onto his knee so he could

stroke her.

Trask shook his head slowly. "War's a comin'" he said. "Soon... I can feel it."

Harry didn't say anything for a moment as he thought about this. "You can feel it?"

Dermas winked. "My little secret. I just got this feeling that a lot of magic is going to be used here soon. Sort of a sixth sense really... died down after the first war, but...."

"That is interesting," Harry said slowly. "Can you feel how soon?"

Dermas shook his head. "Never can.... just know it's gonna happen. Be prepared for anything, Harry."

A comfortable silence once again fell between them and Hedwig hooted happily as Harry stroked her. Turning from his own thoughts, Harry spoke. "Will you fight when it comes?" he asked.

Trask clicked his tongue against his teeth. "I've every reason to," he mumbled. "I lost my fiancé to... to Voldemort."

Harry nearly gasped at that. "I'm sorry," he managed.

Trask smiled sadly and then leaned over to rough up Harry's hair. "Don't worry about it. It was twenty years ago now...."

"What was her name?" asked Harry.

Trask looked up and then out across the lake as the first sunbeams began to hit it, causing the water to reflect the rising light of the sky. "Dorcas Meadows..." he whispered with a sigh.

Harry was sure he had heard that name before. *Where was it...?* "She was a member of the Order!" he said suddenly. "Moody showed me a photo."

Dermas laughed harshly. "Old Mad-Eye, aye. I didn't join the Order in the first war. I wanted to stay out of it, wanted Dorcas to stay out of it." An awkward silence fell which was broken by Trask a moment later. "You

kill that monster, Harry," he whispered dangerously. "I'll fight with you but, by God, you kill him."

19 March 1997

The Gryffindor Common Room

"A curse that was used heavily in the First Dark War, results in a broken bone?"

"*Cusindeo*," Harry muttered. "Nasty curse. Very useful, though."

"Thanks, Harry," Ron replied as he scribbled down the answer to one of his many Defence Against the Dark Arts review questions.

"Where's Hermione?" Harry asked after that. He hadn't seen her all day.

Ron shrugged. "She has been seeing McGonagall every evening now. They're trying to discover if she can become an Animagus."

"I didn't know that," Harry frowned.

Ron quickly scratched something out on his parchment and then looked up to Harry. "Well... you're hardly ever around anymore mate," he said gently.

Harry didn't reply to that. He knew it was true, he had been seeing less and less of his friends all year. Circumstances had forced them apart, too far apart. He decided then that he would make an extra effort to spend more time with them.

"A shield charm that can defend against physical objects?" Ron asked.

"*Travose*," Harry answered. "Dark brown in colour, very hard to maintain while casting an offensive spell." No sooner had he finished than a quick, brutal stab of pain rushed up and through his scar, forcing him to cry out slightly.

"What is it?" Ron said quickly as Harry rubbed his forehead viciously.

"Don't know..." he managed. "Anticipation... happiness... preparation,

maybe? He's waiting for something. I think he's going to attack soon."

"How soon is *soon*?" Ron asked nervously.

"That," Harry said as the pain died down. "Is anybody's guess...."

19 March 1997

Hogwarts Castle Gates

Draco Malfoy waited impatiently in the shadows by the stone gargoyles that guarded the entrance gates to the magical school. Tonight he would learn of his task, his first real chance to prove himself in the eyes of his Master. A chance to gain the Dark Mark.

The sun had long since sunk behind the castle and a cool wind was blowing across the world. Draco pulled his cloak around himself and mumbled a curse under his breath at the failure for the agent of the Dark Lord to arrive promptly. He was already over twenty minutes late, but Draco knew he would have to wait at least another hour before he could head back up to the castle. Missing the messenger would not be wise.

He wasn't left waiting long. Hearing a squeaking noise behind him in the eaves of the forest, he turned sharply. There was a slight rustling sound. Draco raised his wand and lit it quickly. The light reached out over to the forest and was reflected off something metallic near the closest tree.

"Put it out, fool," whispered a voice that was trying to sound intimidating, but Draco heard the nervousness in it. He did as the voice said anyway.

"Who are you?" he asked sharply.

The man in the darkness moved forward slightly until he was standing in front of Draco. The light wasn't enough so that he could make out any features of the man, but that was probably for the best. "Call me Wormtail," the man said roughly. "And listen closely."

Draco nodded. "My father's owl said to expect a task?"

Wormtail laughed. "Indeed... Lucius was correct. Here, take this."

Wormtail shoved a small rock into Draco's outstretched hand. "What is it?" he asked.

"A voice activated Portkey," Wormtail answered.

20 March 1997

Present Time

As darkness began to fall, Harry thought briefly back to the events that had brought him here, to the edge of war. The events of the last two weeks, when he looked back upon it, could not have prevented the coming struggle. Nothing could have.

"Oh well," he said as the Army of Light Headquarters was emptied, heading towards Hogsmeade.

Turning sharply from the balcony of the Astronomy tower, Harry set off at a run down the many steps of the tower. Taking them two at a time he soon entered the corridor at the bottom of the tower. He heard McGonagall's magically amplified voice echoing throughout the school.

"All students are to make their way to the Great Hall immediately. I repeat, all students to the Great Hall now."

With a nervous, excited feeling in his stomach, Harry ran in the direction of the Great Hall. He was several minutes away even at a full run, but run he did. Passed classrooms he went. Professors were leading their students in an orderly fashion as he bolted past them.

Rounding a corner quickly, Harry came to a sudden stop as Derris appeared from behind the portrait to his left. It was the portrait that led to the Staff quarters. "What's going on?" Trask asked quickly.

Harry took a deep breath. "Come on. Great Hall. I'll explain on the way." And without another word Harry took off at a run again. Trask fell in line beside him, and Harry spoke as they ran. "You were right," he said, bounding down the moving staircases. "It's begun. Death Eaters have attacked Hogsmeade, Dementors are in the forest and on the road, and

the Army of Light is intercepting them. Voldemort is up to something else, though."

Trask shook his head. "How do you know that?"

"Saw it up on the Astronomy tower...."

"No. About Voldemort."

Harry laughed bitterly. "My scar's burning. He's planning something different. We have to tell Dumbledore."

"All students and staff to the Great Hall immediately," McGonagall's voice rang out again.

Stepping off the staircases at a run, Harry and Dermas were now on the ground floor. Students and professors were here as well, but Harry pushed through them. They ran down two corridors and then took a well known shortcut that brought them out near the Entrance Hall. Breathing steadily, the two of them took another corridor and then through the double oak doors to the top of the Entrance Hall.

Jostling through the crowds, Harry and Trask pushed their way into the Great Hall. Most were now seated at their House tables and the staff was running up and down the aisles, taking attendance and counting heads. It was at the same time that Harry entered, that McGonagall emerged from the small anteroom connected to the Hall. Harry scanned the crowds quickly, looking for Dumbledore, but the old headmaster was not there.

Cursing under his breath, Harry ran with Dermas behind him, up and between the Ravenclaw and Gryffindor tables. He was heading towards McGonagall.

"What's happening, Harry?" called Neville as he shot past him.

Not having time to answer, Harry kept on going and came to a skidding stop next to McGonagall, who was heading up to the Staff table. "Where's Dumbledore?" he asked slightly breathless.

McGonagall looked at him in surprise for a moment, but her strict persona quickly took over. "Take your seat, Potter. All students must be accounted for."

The Hall had grown quiet, possibly because everyone wanted to hear what was happening and Harry was most likely to know. Even the Professors had stopped what they were doing. The only sound came from a few late entrants to the Hall.

Harry ignored it all, though. "No," he replied to McGonagall quickly. "Have to tell Dumbledore... Voldemort's not in Hogsmeade."

McGonagall flinched at the Dark Lord's name. "The Headmaster will be well informed, Potter. Now please take your seat!" She raised her voice slightly at the end but Harry would not be intimidated.

"He doesn't know this," Harry said firmly. "Now where is he? His office?"

McGonagall sighed and looked out to the sea of faces behind Harry and Dermas. "Last I saw him he was, Potter. You may still catch him if you hurry."

Not wasting another second, Harry turned on his heel and began to run once again. Realisation had just hit him that the most decisive battle of the war was about to be fought. The coming hours would decide who took the advantage in the coming months. *Hell* Harry thought hopefully *I could kill him today...*

As Harry ran out of the Hall with Dermas Trask behind him, he didn't hear Neville calling his name, nor did he notice that Ron, Hermione and Ginny had never made it to the Great Hall at all. There was also, Snape noticed as he recounted his Slytherins, one of his students missing,

Chapter 29 - The Sword of the Hero

I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears, and sweat.

~~Sir Winston Churchill

As Harry ran out of the Hall with Derris Trask behind him, he did not hear Neville calling his name, nor did he notice that Ron, Hermione and Ginny had never made it to the Great Hall at all. There was also, Snape noticed as he recounted his Slytherins, one of his students missing.

Five Minutes Earlier

"Come on, Ron," Hermione said earnestly, dragging him down the corridor that led to the moving staircase on the fourth floor. "Something is happening. Didn't you hear the urgency in Professor McGonagall's voice?"

Ron nodded. "It might not be anything..." he said, trailing off as he really thought about it. "I wonder where Harry is now?" he asked aloud as Hermione pushed them through a slower moving crowd of students.

Hermione faltered for a moment at his question but she still held his arm strong. "Harry will be fine. He'll be in the Great Hall," she said quickly and then proceeded to shout at a slow moving bunch of third years, her Prefect mode kicking in.

Falling silent, Ron increased his pace and the two of them were practically running towards the Great Hall now. They took a shortcut behind one of the portraits and soon emerged a floor above the Entrance Hall. It seemed that no one else had used this shortcut though, as the corridor in which they now stood was deserted.

Ron and Hermione set off at a jog again down the corridor, passing portraits and suits of armour that chastised them for running in the castle. What happened next was something that when Ron looked back on it, had to be the will of fate. They were the only ones in the corridor, no one else was around, but that didn't stop Ron from hearing the cry.

"What was that?" he said, coming to a sudden stop. Their linked hands forcing Hermione to do the same.

"What?" she said impatiently, a frown appearing on her face. "Come on,

Ron," she continued, "We have to get to the-"

Hermione stopped abruptly as Ron placed a hand over her mouth and then turned to listen hard. Barely a moment passed before he and Hermione heard it again. A stifled cry, coming from within the walls.

Only it wasn't the walls, Ron realised turning to look at the slightly ajar classroom door to his right. It was coming from in there. Not waiting for Hermione, Ron stepped forward quickly. That cry had sounded too familiar. He didn't know *what* he was about to find in this room, but he knew *who* he would.

Ron threw the door open angrily and his suspicions were confirmed. There was Ginny crouching behind a desk, crying out as a barrage of curses hit it. A deep red curse, the Stunning spell, flew towards her. Not wasting a second Ron turned to the source of the curse and found himself staring at Draco Malfoy.

Ron's anger increased ten fold and he charged at the Slytherin. With his back to the door, Malfoy had not yet seen him. So it came as a surprise when he was knocked hard to the floor.

Malfoy hit the ground hard, but no sooner was he down than he rolled out from under the weight on his back and sprung to his feet quickly. "Bloody hell," he cursed when he saw Ron Weasley stand as well, fumbling for his wand in his robes.

Ignoring the second Weasley, Draco turned to Ginny crouching behind the desk. She was his mission, his task. He had to do this lest he incur the Dark Lord's wrath, which, as his father had warned him, was not a wise thing to do. "Come here," he shouted viciously, jumping over the desk and falling behind her. Malfoy whirled around fast, pulling Ginny up by her hair as he went.

Ron, having finally gotten hold of his wand aimed it at Malfoy, but he was too late. Ginny stood in front of him, anger and a slight fear evident in her eyes. Though she didn't stand by choice, Malfoy held her in front of him, like a shield.

"What are you doing, Malfoy?" Ron asked angrily, aiming his wand in a

vain attempt to curse the Slytherin. But he held Ginny well; Ron could not get a shot in.

"Helping the Dark Lord," he sneered laughingly.

At that moment things got a lot more real, but Ron's anger increased. Five and a half years of hating the Slytherin had now accumulated and taken their toll. "VOLDEMORT!" he exploded, surprising even himself. "You want to take *Ginny* to Voldemort?"

Malfoy opened his mouth but Ginny beat him to it. "Ron, he tricked me," she said. "I was running to the Great Hall and I thought I heard Har-"

"Shut up," Malfoy snarled, yanking her head back by her hair. "Now," he said looking back up to Ron. "It has been a pleasure, Weasel, but your sister and I have to leave now."

Hermione silently observed this confrontation, wand drawn impotently, puzzled by the fact that Malfoy had not drawn his own. *What is he doing* she thought. *He has to escape. He has become a Death Eater, and Voldemort wants Ginny. Why....?* her mind screamed at her, but another part did hazard a guess. *Harry and Ginny have become more than good friends.* She had seen all the signs, apparently so had Malfoy and he had told Voldemort.

"Malfoy," she began as he pulled something out of his robe pocket. It was a.-

Rock...

She frowned at the rock in his left hand. All the books she had read and memorised flooded her brain. An improbable answer formed in her mind as to the true nature of the rock. Malfoy held a voice activated Portkey. He was going to escape with Ginny.

Ron groaned in frustration as he searched for a shot at Malfoy, but Ginny was in the way. He could not do it. Deciding he had had enough anyway, Ron pocketed his wand and simply lunged at the Slytherin. Taken by surprise Malfoy didn't react straight away, and Ron's fist connected with his jaw.

He fell backwards, rock in hand, pulling Ginny down with him. She screamed as she fell, landing hard on the stone floor. Ron fell as well, hitting Malfoy in the stomach. Malfoy choked at the blow but then merely smiled. Ron frowned and raised his fist again but it never connected.

Hermione had not been idle. As soon as she saw Malfoy fall she ran forward, knowing without a doubt she was about to lose her boyfriend and one of her best friends if she did not act quickly. She jumped over a desk in her way and saw Ron raise his fist against Malfoy on the floor, who still held Ginny roughly by the hair. But she was struggling.

"No, Ron" she cried, rushing forward and grabbing his fist in midair.

"Hermione!" he said angrily, taking his attention off of Malfoy for only a second.

That was all the blonde Slytherin needed.

"*Activate*," he said ominously and Hermione froze in horrified realization as the rock in his left hand glowed a deep blue.

They were all connected. Malfoy held Ginny, Ron held Malfoy and Hermione held Ron. A brilliant flash of deep blue light later and they were gone. A few upturned desks the only evidence that anybody had been in the room.

Harry and Dermas ran through the echoing, empty halls and corridors of Hogwarts. Up flights of stairs, across landings and balconies, and through one very handy shortcut that brought them out two floors below Dumbledore's office.

"What are we going to do, Harry?" Trask asked.

"Not actually sure..." he shrugged, rounding a corner. "But Dumbledore will be at the head of the action and he has to know Voldemort won't be."

Trask frowned. "What?"

Harry shook his head. "Don't ask me how I know, I just do. Voldemort is not in Hogsmeade with the Death Eaters."

The two of them came to the gargoyle that guarded Dumbledore's office and for a moment Harry struggled to recall the password. "Skiving Snackbox," Trask said quickly, but the gargoyle did not move an inch. "That worked earlier this morning..." he said, confusion etched into his features.

Harry ran through the names of his favourite sweets and Trask did the same, but try as they might the gargoyle remained stubbornly still. "Damn it," Harry cried in frustration. "Come on," he said, pushing on the gargoyle.

"I don't think Dumbledore's up there, Harry," Trask said looking out of a window that overlooked the forest and the mountain in the distance.

"Why is that?" he asked quickly.

"Because the battle is at Hogsmeade."

Harry strode to the window and looked out into the distance. What met his eyes was nothing short of chaos. In the distance he could just make out the village of Hogsmeade near the eastern edge of the forest. The Army headquarters on the road had been emptied and he could still see some Aurors hurriedly making their way up the road to the village.

What he could see of the village itself was a disaster. Lights from hundreds if not thousands of curses illuminated the sky even in the daylight. Several buildings were alight and so were a few parts of the forest. Thick black smoke was billowing up and out of the town and from the forest.

Harry then made a decision as he saw the Dementors regrouping on the road to Hogsmeade. He had to get there and help. He turned to Dermal who was still watching the destruction. "I have to go to Hogsmeade," he said. "You can-"

Just then a massive fireball erupted next to Harry near the stone gargoyle. Harry turned quickly, palm already raised. He felt his magic tingling through his arm, ready for use. It actually felt as if it was eager for use. The fireball blazed into existence as Harry and Dermal turned. Dermal flicked his wand up from the holster around his wrist but they

both relaxed a moment later when a golden and red phoenix emerged from the flames.

"Fawkes," Harry said quickly, extending his arm so the phoenix could land. After he did Harry saw that the bird was carrying a scrap of parchment in his mouth. "Thanks," he said, taking it. No sooner was the parchment in Harry's hands than Fawkes took flight again, singing loudly as he disappeared in another ball of flames.

"What does it say, Harry?" Dermal asked.

Harry's eyes ran across the parchment quickly, taking in the fine script that he recognised as Dumbledore's.

Harry

Stay safe at Hogwarts. You are not yet ready to face him.

--Dumbledore

Harry frowned and felt a great deal of anger right then. "Stay safe at Hogwarts..." he whispered. "Well bollocks to that!" Knowing he had a chance to make a difference today, to prove his worth, Harry wasn't about to hide behind the safety of the castle. No, he would fight.

"Back to the Great Hall, Dermal," Harry said, leading the way.

Kingsley Shacklebolt had known this day would come. He had known the Death Eaters would attack. He had known that he would be at the head of the army. He had not known the day would come so soon. The army had only been fully formed for a week.

Nevertheless he supposed he was ready. As he ran into the battlefield of Hogsmeade once again he felt more regretful, than scared. He and four hundred others had battled through the Dementors and finally several hundred Death Eaters stood in their way of victory. Line upon line of dark hooded figures once again blocked the High Street. They were unmoving, unflinching. They were ready.

Kingsley knew that they were outnumbered for now, but the rest of the

Aurors from headquarters would Apparate in once the threat of the Dementors was eliminated. So there he stood, the recently rebuilt Honeydukes to his left, and a few thatched cottages to his right. Behind him stood hundreds of loyal Aurors and beside him his trusted lieutenants.

The Death Eaters still remained unusually still. Kingsley eyed their numbers nervously. He saw the bodies of a few witches and wizards in the street. It had been their deaths that had set off the Unforgivable detectors. The Death Eaters had counted on it. They wanted this fight now. It would be the crucible, that much was clear. Whatever the outcome, the world would once and for all awake to the threat of Voldemort. Dumbledore had assured them all the other night at an Order meeting that they had not yet passed the point of no return. The free Ministries of the world still had a chance to save Britain and themselves but, sadly, this battle had to be fought for that.

Apart from the Death Eaters and Aurors, the street and the surrounding buildings were deserted. After the last Hogsmeade attack, the Ministry had issued three Portkeys to every shop on the High street. They had been put to good use, allowing the residents to escape. Several of the thankfully vacant buildings were alight and billowing in great clouds of black smoke.

"It's going to be a slaughter, sir," the leader of the French Auror Division said to Kingsley in fluent English. "What are your orders?"

Kingsley inwardly sighed and hesitated, though nothing of his hesitation showed on his face. One of the first rules in basic leadership is never to show any other feeling but determination to those who served under you. "We're not going to get them to surrender," Kingsley said strongly. "Tonks?" he called.

Nymphadora Tonks, who had been appointed leader of one of the British squads, stepped forward from the front lines behind Kingsley. "Yes, Sir?" she said.

"How many do you count, Tonks?"

"Five hundred I can see, they're all over the village."

Kingsley nodded his agreement. "Okay," he whispered almost to himself. "Here's the plan." His seven lieutenants stepped in closer. "This is only going to be resolved if we can beat them back. There are going to be losses. I want it known that you have been licensed to kill. Take them out anyway you can."

That was the hardest order Kingsley had ever had to give.

Harry and Dermas arrived at the Great Hall to find it disturbingly silent. A thousand heads turned to greet them as Harry pushed open the oak doors. Snape and Flitwick stood guard near the entrance. The remainder, including Harry's special-training teachers, sat at the Staff table.

Never had Harry known the Great Hall to be so silent. McGonagall had obviously just announced something as she was still standing at the table, but the silence worried Harry. He presumed they had just been told about the attack happening on their doorstep.

"Mr. Potter," McGonagall said nervously, a slight shake to her voice. "Did you find the headmaster?"

Harry frowned, something wasn't right. Something had gone terribly wrong. "No," he answered his head of house. "He had already left when we arrived there."

"Oh dear..." McGonagall sighed and looked down the Gryffindor table. Harry followed her gaze and his eyes quickly swept the entire table from where he was standing in the middle of the Hall. Nothing jumped out at him at first and he was about to turn back to McGonagall when his heart leapt into his throat.

NO.... his mind screamed at him. "WHERE ARE THEY?" he shouted to the Hall nervously. Pure, undiluted fear shot through his veins. He had finally noticed the empty seats of Ron, Hermione and Ginny.

Surprisingly, it was Severus Snape who answered him. "They are gone, Potter," he said emotionlessly, walking down the aisle to meet them. "To where we do not know?"

"How long have they been gone?" he managed, with an urgent tone to his voice.

"They never entered this Hall," Snape said, shaking his head with what may have been regret. "It may also be wise to know that Draco Malfoy is also missing."

Harry turned sharply and looked at Snape painfully. At that moment his anger overtook his fear and those standing and sitting near him felt the raw power exude from him. It came in waves that sent an electric charge through Snape, Dumas, and several Ravenclaws and Gryffindors.

"Easy, Harry," Dumas said calmly.

Harry ignored him. "MALFOY! Shit..." Not wasting another second Harry ran from the Hall again, ignoring the calls for him to stop. Dumas spoke in hurried whispers with Snape for a moment before taking off after him. They were once again running through the castle, but this time with an even greater sense of urgency.

Harry ran from the Great Hall heading immediately for Gryffindor Tower. His mind was a kaleidoscope of images and emotions. A gnawing fear had settled in his stomach and he found himself wishing over and over that they were all right, that he would find them alive and well. But another part of him denied that. Whatever had happened, he would kill Malfoy for being responsible.

Harry came panting to a stop at the portrait of the Fat Lady. Twenty-five minutes had passed since Harry had stood upon the Astronomy Tower and watched the battle begin. In that time he had traversed the castle three times.

The common room was deserted. Not a sign of life anywhere. Racing up the stairs to the dorms Harry took them fast. He burst through the door that led to his trunk and came to a skidding halt in front of it. Throwing open the lid Harry only had one idea in mind. He had to get the Marauders Map. He threw books and clothes out of the way as he searched for it. He had saved the map from the destruction of Privet Drive all those months ago and it had lain in disuse in his trunk since.

After a moment searching Harry found it underneath his old Charms textbook and quickly unfolded it. He knew this was supposed to work with a wand but his wandless magic was just as competent so-

"I solemnly swear that I am up to no good." Harry felt a tingling sensation in his fingertips and then the map began to appear. Ink lines whirled across it quickly and soon he was holding a completed map in his hands.

He scanned it quickly, determined to find his friends somewhere on the school grounds. He did not see Demas enter the room, so great was his desire to search every inch of the map. His eyes flew from corner to corner of the parchment. Ron, Hermione, Ginny and Malfoy were nowhere to be found within the boundaries of Hogwarts.

"DAMN IT!" Harry cried, kicking his trunk hard. The strength of the dragon hide so strong that his foot splintered the thick wood.

"They're gone?" Trask said quickly. Harry turned abruptly and nodded, sickened.

His friends, his closest friends, the few people he loved, were most likely with his mortal enemy. A creature that would not hesitate to kill them. Ginny was with *him*. They had only just really found each other. *NO... This can't be happening* he told himself. *This isn't meant to happen... I can't lose anybody else.*

"Stay with me, Harry," Demas said strongly. "Where could they be?"

Damn it! his mind cried. *WHY? When will it end?*

"You would know if they had died, right?" Trask asked.

Harry blinked and for a moment thought rationally. Yes he would know if Voldemort had used the Killing curse, his scar would have burned with extraordinary pain. It was burning now, but it wasn't overly painful. "We have to find him," Harry said determinedly. "I don't know how long we have... but..."

"I know," Trask said. "It looks like it's only us. Where are we heading?"

Harry did not have any idea where he could find Voldemort. Something

unexplainable told him simply that he would not find him in Hogsmeade, where the battle for the Wizarding world was currently being fought. He could think of nowhere else though. Hogsmeade was at least a place to start.

"We have to get to Hogsmeade," Harry told Dermal. "We have to get there now." As he said this he turned to his trunk and pulled out his Firebolt. It hadn't been used in awhile but magic kept it in mint condition. He shoved the Marauders Map into his pocket and then motioned Trask to follow him.

"But you told me Voldemort isn't at Hogsmeade," Trask said, following Harry across the room.

"He isn't," Harry said. "But that is all we have right now, and I'm not going to sit here and wait until my forehead explodes to let me know the only people I care about have just been murdered." His voice took on a hard edge as he said this. "I have to do *something*. You're welcome to come along if you like, Trask."

Dermal Trask nodded. He would follow Harry. He was at least four times his age but Dermal felt as if he could follow Harry anywhere at that moment. There was a certain feeling you got from being around him. A feeling that just by being near him you could do the impossible. Harry, whether he knew it or not, was the one who over the years had taught the world to hold on that extra second. He was their hope. He was all they had. Dermal would follow him.

Harry approached the window in the dormitory, broom in hand. As he drew near, the glass shattered for his arrival and a cool breeze rushed in to meet them.

"We're not walking then?" Trask asked wryly.

"No," Harry answered simply and then, surprisingly, passed the Firebolt to Trask. "I trust you know how to use this, Dermal," he said.

Trask nodded. "Aye, but how are you getting there?"

Harry offered a nervous smile and then without saying another word, turned around and ran the few short steps to the window. Without a

moment's hesitation, a moment's fear, a moment's indecision, he jumped clear of the sill and out into the open air. Trask watched his form fall from sight and it took his mind a second to realise what had just happened. He ran to the window in disbelief. No sooner had he reached the shattered frame than a great mass shot up past him and high into the sky.

Dermas stepped back in shock as the rush of air from the creature ran through his robes and hair. It took him a moment to realise that it was Harry. Harry had told him of his ability to transform into a Griffin at will, his ability to perform the Animagus transfiguration, but that was nothing compared to seeing it up close. Trask was floored.

Harry flew up and past the window of his dorm room and circled once around the tower. As he passed the window again he did so slowly and looked meaningfully at Dermas. Then he soared up in a drift of wind and arched his wings gracefully taking him towards Hogsmeade.

His enhanced griffin senses could already smell the smoke rising from the village. He could hear the clash of spells and the sound of the screams. He was about to enter into a battle that would be the fiercest he had ever encountered. Preparing himself as best he could, Harry covered the distance to Hogsmeade effortlessly.

It had happened so fast Kingsley reflected, as he took down another Death Eater. But for every Death Eater struck down, there seemed to be another three to take his place. The battle had begun with planned strategy, but all plans, all scenarios, all tactics had gone out the window after the first Killing Curse was flung by a Death Eater.

The Death Eaters and Aurors had learned their lessons from the last Hogsmeade battle. They did not fire hundreds of curses to meet each other in the middle of the street to have them come shooting back on their casters. They had charged into each other, drawing the battle into hand to hand fighting, with the curses flying fast in the air. The first few minutes were the worst. Dozens, maybe even hundreds fell on both sides as a green glow illuminated the street.

Shattered, smouldering wreckage was all that remained of most of Hogsmeades recently rebuilt buildings. Fire engulfed both ends of the street, seemingly trapping both groups in a fiery pit, from which the only escape was victory or death. Though Kingsley remained strong. He had seen Dumbledore arrive with Remus Lupin so he knew they were fighting on the stronger side. The rest of the Aurors from headquarters had made a spectacular entrance and with them, the numbers on each side were rounded off almost even.

Kingsley was leading an Auror squad of fifty into the heart of the Death Eater lines. He had been hit three times by burning curses and had a long jagged cut running down his cheek to his chin. Adrenaline and the heat of the battle allowed him to ignore his injuries. His squad of battle hardened Aurors pushed hard. They did not have a clear objective, only the desire to rid the street of all whom possessed the Dark Mark.

And that's something else Kingsley thought, ending the life of a Death Eater with a neck breaking curse. *Voldemort and his inner circle had not yet made an appearance.* Kingsley thought nervously. The forces of Light had Dumbledore, who was most likely taking out large numbers of Death Eaters single handily, while the Master of the Death Eater Army was nowhere to be found. It was cause for concern.

Kingsley with three men by his side and about four dozen in a close knit group behind him, managed to push into the Death Eaters as far back as the Three Broomsticks, but to go any further would be suicide. Beyond the pub and further down the street, Kingsley could still see the endless mass of black robes that was the lines of the Death Eaters. He sighed and fired a reductor curse into a group of his enemies angrily. They had only just begun.

Knowing further advancement up the street was foolish and relatively impossible, Kingsley ordered his squad to form a strong line to keep the Death Eaters from advancing any further *down* the street. While this tactic was incredibly brave of the fifty or so Aurors, they were soon bearing the brunt of the dark assault. Thirteen Aurors cast shield charms quickly, but in their haste the charms were not as strong as they should have been, and were useless against the Killing curse.

"HOLD THEM!" Kingsley shouted, but only those to his immediate left and right heard him. The message was quickly relayed down the line as more Aurors ran up the street, dodging scattered Death Eaters in an attempt to join the leading squad.

With renewed forces the Aurors pushed ahead as hard as they could, but it was all for nought as Kingsley watched an entire section of his line obliterated by some serious Dark magic. An explosion rocked the street and Kingsley was nearly thrown off his feet as a fireball of blue light ripped into his squad from the combined magic of six Death Eaters.

A second fireball was fired from the same group of Death Eaters, screaming down into the cluster of Aurors that was closest to Kingsley. This knocked Kingsley off his feet and sent him hurtling back into the black, burnt wooden support beam that had once held up the front wall of the Three Broomsticks. It collapsed under him as he hit it failing to break his fall.

"Bugger..." he moaned as he landed in the hot ash of the still smouldering floor of the pub. His Auror training took over and a quick freezing charm took away the heat of the ash, but he was still slightly burnt from the fall.

His limbs and joints aching in protest, Kingsley got back up and performed a few quick healing spells that he would regret later on when they wore off. The battle raged on in the High street, or what was left of it. The Death Eaters and Aurors had struck a deadlock. Neither side was giving an inch, and as a result neither side was moving an inch. The fiercest of the fighting took place just outside of the ruins of the Three Broomsticks, where the two forces met and where Kingsley had stood only moments ago.

Taking a deep breath, Kingsley erected a quick shield charm and jumped out of the burning ruins that were the Wizarding pub. He fell to the ground on the cobblestone road, as he had planned, and a quick roll brought him up on his feet. He came up firing and was soon at the lead of the Aurors again.

"STAND FAST!" he called, as a third fireball from the small group of Death Eaters rained down upon the Aurors. Kingsley was ready for this

one though, and he raised his wand at the falling missile of fire. "*FORS*-" he began but at that moment his left side exploded in blinding pain and he fell to his knees.

The fireball, now falling unchecked, slammed into the Aurors hard. Several were incinerated instantly, but others burned more slowly. For Kingsley the entire fight seemed to slow almost to a stop. He saw everything in slow motion but assessed it normally. The sounds of battle were a dull roar in his ears. It was as if time had slowed down just for him. He saw good men, good Aurors die in the explosion from the fireball and then he saw the shockwave of the blast rush out in an amazing circle of light that knocked many to the ground.

Turning slowly, Kingsley felt the unrelenting pain in his left side and, almost regretfully, he looked down to it. A blade protruded from his robes, and it ran through right between his ribs and just barely avoided puncturing his left lung. His breathing came in sharp, ragged gasps as he looked, uncomprehendingly, at the hand grasping the ivory handle of the blade. He followed the black gloved hand up the black robed arm until his eyes connected with that of two others hidden behind a slit of a white mask.

The eyes that met his were cold, merciless, unforgiving. They belonged to a Death Eater who followed Voldemort out of sheer reverence. In those eyes Kingsley saw the unassailable belief in Voldemort and his ways. The man who had stabbed him believed he was doing the right thing. He believed that magic should only belong to Pureblooded wizards.

Kingsley grimaced as the man twisted the blade. It hurt like hell, but a realisation had just hit him hard. It was the realisation that all faced at one point or another in their lives. No matter who you were you never escaped this truth. It was the realisation that came with being faced with your own mortality. As his blood trickled down the side of his chest and stained his white Auror robes, Kingsley realised he was dying.

And with that, time sped up again for Kingsley and he roared with pain as the Death Eater pulled the dagger from his side. All the sounds of battle returned full force and Kingsley felt tears of absolute agony in his eyes.

He looked up again at the man who had stabbed him and saw the dagger rise above his head. He was going to finish the job, bring the dagger crashing down for another blow. One that would end it all.

Kingsley found himself holding his side as the blood gushed from him. He saw the glint of the blade that would end his life shining in the sunlight that managed to penetrate the clouds of thick black smoke. He saw Aurors and Death Eaters fall out of the corner of his eye and then he saw the blade fall.

With an inward cry of fear Kingsley closed his eyes against the coming end, knowing he could not escape the sharp steel of the knife. He had come so far and now it was over. One second passed and then another, but nothing happened. He heard a deafening roar and his eyes snapped open fast. No matter what he had expected to see, he wasn't prepared for what met his eyes.

The Death Eater who had attacked him was now lying dead on the floor, his blade resting harmlessly beside him. But it was what had stopped the man from killing him that made his eyes grow wide and momentarily forget the growing pain in his side. It was the last thing he had expected to see, standing astride his fallen enemy. It was a griffin.

Kingsley did not see the man on a broom land next to the griffin. In fact no one took notice of Dermas Trask's landing and the fighting ceased as Aurors and Death Eaters alike stood stock still at the appearance of this impressive magical creature. It made for an unusual sight. The griffin stood in the small space between the two fighting forces where only moments before thick streams of curses had run through ruthlessly. It let out another mighty roar, this one directed at the Death Eaters and then, in the blink of an eye, it was gone.

All who saw it gasped at the disappearance and watched with wide eyes as a figure rose up from where the griffin had stood only moments before. In this figure's hands were two balls of glowing white light that shot off small bolts of gold lightning as he rose. There was no wind but the black hair and clothes of the figure swirled as if there was. The figure faced the Death Eaters so the Aurors could not see his face.

Harry rose angrily from the ground after transforming back into a human.

His pure magic leapt to his hands as he went and Harry welcomed it. He was furious with the way the day had turned out. Ron, Hermione and Ginny were missing and he knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that they were with Voldemort. His scar kept up a constant burning but nothing as bad as if Voldemort had killed. And now he had seen Kingsley stabbed, just after he had seen Dumbledore duelling with several Death Eaters further down the street by the crater in the ground that used to be Honeydukes.

Harry looked to his left and saw Dermas hurrying to join the line of Aurors, a brief look to his right and he saw a few injured people on the ground crawling to safety as the battle had halted for the moment. He turned back to look at the army of Death Eaters in front of him and saw with a smile that some of them had finally recognised him and were just now raising their wands.

Not wasting another second, Harry did not blink or hesitate as he threw his hands together, fusing both balls of pure magic into one. The result was instantaneous. A blinding light exploded with a crack from Harry's hands and a white wall of pure magic rose up from within him.

All but Harry had to look away from the blinding light as it rose into the air. It rose above the beleaguered village about thirty feet and then, in one quick moment, split down the middle and returned to earth. The two thick beams of magic fell on either side of Harry silently and reached out underneath his feet for the length of the village, effectively drawing a line between the Aurors and Death Eaters. With a roar that could have rivalled thunder, the magic jumped forth from the ground in an impressive blue sheet that stretched high into the sky.

The barrier of blue light rose as Harry had turned back to the Aurors. The Death Eaters, who had gotten over the initial shock of seeing a griffin and then seeing Harry, finally fired their curses, but they were useless against Harry's pure magic shield. Another devastating fireball collided with the blue wall of sparkling light but it was deflected back onto the confused Death Eaters, incinerating half a dozen of them.

Harry knew he did not have long. As soon as an *Avada Kedavra* hit the shield he had erected it would shatter. He had to work fast. The Aurors

still seemed surprised by his arrival and those on the few lines up the front followed his progress with their eyes. Harry turned and ran the few steps over to the fallen form of Kingsley Shacklebolt. He came to a skidding halt and fell to his knees beside the Auror commander.

"Harry...?" Kingsley whispered, his breath coming in sharp ragged gasps.

Harry did not speak. He nodded quickly and ripped Kingsley's robes off his chest. He saw the thin shirt he wore beneath his robes was stained red with blood. Harry winced and then quickly, urgently as he heard the spells shattering against his shield, covered Kingsley's wound with his hands.

"*Sanitas*," he spoke, thankful he had paid attention in his Charms and Healing lessons earlier that week.

Kingsley saw light on Harry's palms and then he felt the pain in his side recede. It lessened so much that he was able to sit up and examine his wound. He saw that the magic had rejoined his skin, sealing the jagged cut. Harry had saved his life.

BOOM!!!!

The shield shattered under the force of the Killing curse and the green light shot through the blue and hit an unprepared Auror in the face. He died before he hit the ground. Harry turned sharply to see the Death Eaters raise their wands as one, all the while blue particles of light falling like snow from the recently destroyed shield charm.

"Damn...." he breathed, raising his palm. "*Cusindeo!*"

Dark red light shot from his arm and hit one of the nearby Death Eaters in the leg, shattering the man's bones. A volley of other curses followed Harry's as the Aurors were the first to strike back now the shield was down. Kingsley rose shakily to his feet and rejoined the fight, and Dermas was creating Portkeys out of loose cobblestone to hand to the wounded. He keyed all the Portkeys for St. Mungo's.

Many in the Death Eater front line fell under the volley of Auror curses but the next line quickly replaced them, and fired curses of their own.

Harry found himself up the front of the Auror lines, deflecting any curses back the way they came. The Death Eaters were targeting him though, and he was hard put to it to deflect the curses back onto their caster.

The Aurors, seeing Harry's power, recognising his face, knowing their hero, began to group either side of him and return curses, protecting him from the merciless Death Eater onslaught. They couldn't block against the *Avada Kedavra* however, and the Auror next to Harry fell, enveloped in green light.

Harry swore, deflecting all the curses he could.

Harry and the two dozen or so Aurors around him had been drawn into the centre of the fight. On either side of them the street was busy with both sides fighting, but it was the most intense where they stood. Harry had not wanted this to happen, he had not wanted to get drawn into the fight. He needed to speak to Dumbledore and had been flying his way when he saw Kingsley fall to the Death Eater with the dagger. At that point his hero side had taken over and now here he was at the head of the Auror army, keeping as many alive as he could.

"*PROTEGO!*" Trask cried, shielding himself from a neck-breaking curse. "*Portus...*" he said quickly afterwards, enchanting a piece of burnt wood and shoving it into the hands of an equally burnt Auror, who was only just alive.

He looked over to where he had last seen Harry, but his line of sight was now blocked by battling Aurors. Dernas could hazard a guess as to where Harry was though. He could see one particular area of the street being absolutely rained upon by Death Eater curses, but most of them were being deflected. *Harry has to be there* he thought with awe. *Only he would try and deflect every curse flung at the Aurors.* Though Dernas noticed he was doing just that, and slowly the Aurors were pushing further up the street and on to a hopeful victory.

Harry sighed and winced as he faltered and three curses hit their mark. One Stunning spell was deflected off of his chest armour. A cutting charm slashed his cheek open and he tasted blood. A burning curse set fire to his white polo shirt. Not showing a moment's hesitation though, Harry took two steps forward and the Aurors followed him. He was

flinging deflection spells from his hands constantly and was raising weak shield charms just as fast. It was draining him physically, but he was doing well. He was saving many lives and annoying the hell out of the Death Eaters.

The armour he was wearing protected his skin from his burning shirt but it was a little bit distracting. Just as the flames engulfed his sleeve and singed the hair on his forearm, Harry was doused in cold water. He chanced a quick look to his right and smiled as he saw a familiar face.

"REMUS!" he cried happily, deflecting half a dozen spells from the Aurors, himself and his former professor. "WHAT-"

"I CAME WITH DUMBLEDORE!" Remus shouted back just as loudly, raising his own shield charms. "HE GUESSED IT WAS YOU WHEN THAT MASSIVE SHIELD CHARM WAS RAISED. HE SENT ME TO PROTECT YOU!"

Harry nodded. "WHERE IS DUMBLEDORE?" he asked quickly, pushing back a Death Eater and firing a stunning spell.

Remus bit back a curse as an Auror fell next to him, claimed by the Killing curse. The one thing that Harry could not block. "AT THE BACK, DUELLING WITH DEATH EATERS ATTACKING FROM BEHIND."

Harry swore upon hearing that. It meant the Aurors were fighting on two fronts now. He had to keep pushing through the lines in front of him and free them this side, if they were to have any chance of winning. Shaking his head to clear it as best he could of the scar pain, Harry went on the offensive. In quick succession he fired four bone breaking curses and three Death Eaters fell.

"WHY ARE YOU HERE, HARRY?" Remus called. "YOU SHOULD HAVE STAYED AT HOGWARTS!"

Harry ducked a cutting curse and raised what felt like the millionth shield charm that day. "THEY'RE GONE, REMUS," he shouted angrily and his magic bubbled within him. "VOLDEMORT'S GOT RON, HERMIONE AND GINNY."

Remus gasped. "HOW?"

But Harry never got to answer. A powerful blasting curse was fired from one of the nearby Death Eaters and shot through the air towards Remus at a devastating speed. Harry felt the power coming off of it and he gasped. It was a forged spell. It was several blasting curses combined into one of awesome power. It was enough to rip Remus to nothing.

Harry jumped in front of his former professor, his father's last friend, his friend and he briefly saw Remus' eyes widen in shock and surprise. "HARRY-" he called but it was too late.

The dark red light of the fused spell hit Harry clean in the chest and collided hard with his dragon armour. To Harry it felt as if he had been hit with a sledgehammer. He was lucky that was all that happened. The force of the spell flung him into the air barely missing knocking Remus on the head as he went.

Struggling to breathe, Harry was thrown back over the lines of Aurors and over the main force battling the Death Eaters in a spin. Everything was a blur as he fell hard. He fell onto a dead Auror in a part of the street that was littered with bodies, and several duelling pairs of fighters.

Harry landed on his back and all the air was knocked clean out of him. He had fallen onto a dead Auror but still he coughed and struggled to stand as he sucked in desperate breaths. His vision was blurry as he stood and it took him a minute to realise he had lost his glasses. He could see a mass of black up ahead on the street that he assumed was the two fighting forces but it was hazy. He saw fallen lumps around him and the burnt out shells of cottages and businesses but it was all a blur.

Not good he thought. *Okay, concentrate. "Accio Glasses!"* he shouted, raising both his palms. A long, desperate moment passed and Harry heard a hundred different sounds of battle. Explosions, curses, cries, and then he felt something fly neatly into his hand.

Breathing a sigh of relief Harry placed his glasses on his face and everything became clear. Almost clear anyway. *"Reparo,"* he whispered, the spider web cracks in his lenses repairing themselves. It was then that it happened.

Harry's glasses repaired themselves just in time for him to see a dark

figure rushing directly towards him. Harry instantly raised his palm but the Death Eater was too close and he crashed into Harry hard, sending him back to the ground. The man landed on top of him with a grunt and then mercilessly punched him hard in his jaw. Harry heard a sickening crack that was accompanied with a shooting pain right up the side of his face.

"ARGH!" he cried as his jaw snapped. The Death Eater laughed and landed another blow on Harry's broken jaw. The pain from this one was blinding as sharp jolts of pain ran up every nerve on the right side of his face. As the man hit him again, Harry suddenly thought of Ginny, and how her life was in Voldemort's hands. A sudden, unexpected well of fury erupted inside of him and with a vicious cry he tensed his right arm and balled it into a fist as he went. He did not stop there. Mercilessly he swung his arm upward from the ground and it connected with the Death Eaters chin, shattering his mask and tearing the skin on Harry's knuckles.

Both of them winced and the man fell off of Harry. Not wasting a second Harry rolled away and came up on his knees. He saw the man fumbling for his wand but Harry now had the advantage. "*CUSINDEO!*" he cried, his palm alight with the magic.

The bone breaking curse only had a short distance to travel but somehow the Death Eater managed to get a shield charm erected. Harry's eyes widened in surprise and he fell back against the stone as his own curse flew back over his head. What happened next happened so fast Harry didn't even realise it had until it was over.

The Death Eater lunged at Harry, drawing a dagger from his waist belt as he went. Harry saw what was going to happen and he twitched. The man had pounced from the ground and was now coming down on Harry with a dagger positioned right above his throat.

His basic survival instinct took over and Harry saw his only way out. He blinked and then in one life changing second the long, silver blade of Godric Gryffindor was grasped firmly in his left hand. Harry saw the Death Eaters eyes widen in fear the split second before he fell onto the extremely sharp point of the blade in Harry's hand. There was a gut

wrenching crunch and a moment's resistance before the sword came clean out of the Death Eaters back, impaling him fully on the length of the blade.

Harry lay there in shock for only a moment before he realised he had had no choice. *It was either me or him* he thought, pushing the man down to his side and pulling the blade out of his stomach quickly. "Jesus...." he managed, putting away the sword with a thought. His eyes were locked with the now dead Death Eater and he shook his head sadly. The reality of the matter was that it was war, there was no longer any time for doubt. He had grown up too fast.

It still took something out of him though. Every life he claimed took a little something out of him, making him feel less of a person. *No!* Harry told himself. He had to concentrate on what he was trying to save, not what he was destroying. A world without Voldemort demanded these sacrifices on his part.

"HARRY!" shouted a familiar and welcome voice.

"Dumbledore..." Harry tried to speak but winced as sharp pain shot up the side of his face from his broken jaw.

Dumbledore ran over to Harry. He had just come from the far end of Hogsmeade by the road that led to Hogwarts. He had been keeping, along with dozens of Aurors, the Dementors and any other Death Eaters from entering the village. But he had seen Harry fighting with a man, and not doing very well, and had rushed to help.

"Why did you come, Harry?" Dumbledore asked, sounding disappointed that Harry had disobeyed him.

Harry did not speak. He looked at Dumbledore briefly and then spat out some blood. He then took a deep breath and rested his hand on the right side of his face. *"Firmus Sanitas!"* He breathed a sigh of relief as the quick heal spell took effect. It was a spell his Healing teacher had taught him, that took away the pain of any injury and made that body part work as if it was uninjured. Though when it wore off the pain and injury would be worse. He did not care much right now.

Looking back at his headmaster, Harry spoke quickly. "Professor," he said as Dumbledore finally drew level to him. "He's got them. Ron, Hermione and... and Ginny. Voldemort's got them."

Dumbledore's face paled and he stared at Harry unbelievably for a moment. A word forming on his lips that Harry answered before it was said. "I don't know. But Draco Malfoy is missing as well." A shadow passed across Dumbledore's ancient face and he looked back up to the castle in the distance. "And I also know that Voldemort doesn't plan on coming here. He's up to something else, but I don't know what."

"Can you see-" Dumbledore began but was cut off as an explosion of such force rocked the ground where they stood.

Harry turned sharply and looked twenty metres down the street to the back end of the Aurors trying to make their way up the street and past them to the Death Eaters trying to push the other way down the street. Blue fire shot high into the sky from the front lines where Harry had stood only three minutes ago. The Death Eaters had used a fused fireball spell and it had obliterated two dozen Aurors. It had been huge and made of liquid fire.

Harry felt his heart skip a few beats as his mind jumped to Remus, who he had last seen near the area where the blue sea of fire now burned all in its path.

Remus only just managed to raise another shield charm as he watched Harry flung back through the air. His mind registered the fact that Harry had just saved his life. He was a werewolf so most curses could not easily kill him, but the strength of that blasting curse would have.

There was no time for anymore thought though, as with Harry gone the Death Eater curses were coming in thick and fast. Remus took over Harry's previous duty and began deflecting as many curses as he could from the Aurors, but he was nowhere near as proficient at it as Harry had been. Though he did his best.

Remus' wand swung through the air as he deflected three stunning

spells from the nearby Death Eaters. It was relatively useless though as more rained down only moments later. Remus sighed in exasperation and decided to keep on the offence. He fired two stunning spells and one Death Eater fell for his efforts. He did not get off another though as he had to renew his shield charm.

"*Protego!*" he cried, the blue light surrounding him instantly in a magical protection. It did not last long though as he heard the Killing curse incantation.

"*AVADA KEDAVRA!*" shouted a Death Eater barely seven feet away from Remus.

Remus saw the green light of death shoot through the air and head towards a group of Aurors about three paces to his left. With a cry Remus jumped forward and tackled the nearest Auror to the ground, just as the green light flew over him. He felt the cold of the curse miss him by an inch and he breathed a sigh of relief as he and the Auror he had tackled hit the ground.

"REMUS!" the Auror beneath him shouted and Remus gasped in shock.

"HELLO, TONKS," he said as casual as if they were back at Order headquarters.

She leaned in and whispered in his ear, "Thanks for that." she said with a tired smile, pushing a piece of hair out of her face.

Remus nodded and was on his feet again in an instant. Tonks was just as fast and soon the two of them were swept away in the tide of the battle and lost each other. Shaking his head and wiping away the perspiration from his forehead, Remus continued to fight.

The battle raged for another minute in which Remus did some quick spell work that kept him (and several Aurors) alive for another few seconds, but he was tiring. The adrenaline coupled with his werewolf strength could keep him going longer than most but the intense physical and magical strain the fight was putting on him was immense, and he soon began to feel light headed.

It was then that he saw a giant blue light shoot up into the sky from within

the Death Eater lines. He frowned, knowing that a small group of Death Eaters had been casting horrendous dark magic throughout this battle, and that was devastating the Aurors. Remus watched the beam of blue light morph and stretch into a ball of blue fire and then triple in size. His eyes widened in realisation and he began to run across the line of Aurors, dodging spells and shouting to anyone that would listen.

"SHIELD CHARMS!" he shouted, casting several as he ran. "SHIELD CHARMS." But it was no good. The huge blue ball fell just as the Aurors began to scatter and raise what protection they could. Remus realised even he was not far enough away to dodge the massive fireball and was certain the thing would either kill him outright or worse, leave him burning on the street.

The fireball hit twelve feet from Remus and the jolt from the impact sent him falling back over a body and hard onto the ash covered ground. He saw many Aurors and some Death Eaters engulfed by the stream of blue fire that moved out from the point of impact like a flowing river.

He gasped as he saw the stream gush towards him fast. His wand was lying a few feet away and Remus knew he would never reach it in time. This was the end, he had run his race. The river of dark blue flames engulfed the dead lying on the street and burnt them to nothing but ash and it was two feet away from the fallen form of Remus.

Remus's mind flicked through a thousand images of his life up to that point in one agonizing second as he was certain he had finally met his death. He saw James and Sirius at the Sorting ceremony in his first year, when Voldemort had been nothing but a rising power at the time. He saw James coming to talk to him at the Gryffindor table when no one else would, Sirius sitting next to him in Transfiguration when everyone else stayed clear of him as he appeared to be constantly sick. There was Lily holding Harry after giving birth and James wrestling with Sirius after Sirius had remarked on how much Harry looked suspiciously like tiny Professor Flitwick.

He remembered when it had all fallen apart with the apparent betrayal of Sirius and from there it was just all downhill. *Oh well* he sighed, looking back to the rushing flames as they flowed ever closer. He felt the heat for

one instant before it washed over his small piece of ground, taking with it many bodies of the dead. Remus was no longer there.

. After Dernas had landed he had shrunk Harry's Firebolt down to pocket size and placed it in the left pocket of his white robes. He had then created two dozen Portkeys and had saved as many lives. Now he was fighting for his life.

Trask dodged and his shield charm deflected two burning curses and one blasting, the magical protection resounding with each impact. He breathed a sigh of relief that was short lived as he returned fire with a body bind jinx. The lines of Death Eaters seemed endless from where he stood and Trask shook his head as curses of death rocketed above and to either side of him.

Throwing himself to the ground, Dernas avoided the Killing curse, which he noticed the Death Eaters were using more and more. Things were starting to get really dangerous. He jumped back to his feet and cast a few shield charms around the immediate area, offering some protection to the half a dozen Aurors to his left and right.

Trask watched angrily as Aurors were cut down mercilessly, bathed in green light that ended life unforgivingly. He cast a cutting charm that slit the throat of the nearest Death Eater and whirled around on the spot to deflect a blasting curse. For a moment Dernas contemplated drawing his sword, but the sheer amount of magic in the air put a stop to that thought. If he did not use magic he would be defenceless. He may take a few down with his sword but in the end he had to use magic or die.

So use magic he did and slowly but surely he held his ground against the Death Eater onslaught. Trask knew the Death Eaters held the upper hand, as they were not above using Unforgivables and dark magic. He knew that the Aurors had to win here, or the Death Eaters would just simply wash over them.

As he fought, Trask recognised a few of the people closest to where he was fighting. He saw Remus Lupin tackle Tonks to the ground. He had saved her life and nearly lost his own. Dernas knew both of them from

the Order. There was Kingsley directing an assault on the front of the Death Eater line and the ranks of the Aurors were filled with familiar faces. People he had taught how to use a sword years ago during Voldemort's first rise to power.

Trask winced as he took a burning curse in the shoulder, his magical robes offering some small protection against the heat. He stupefied the Death Eater that had fired it and renewed his shield charm. It was shattered a moment later though as he once again fell underneath the cold light of the Killing curse.

"Damn it..." he cursed under his breath, getting back to his feet for felt like the tenth time. He looked around helplessly now, the rest of the battle all too clear for him. The Aurors and Death Eaters would fight until one side had no one left standing. It was a fight to the death. *And the Death Eaters may win* Dernas thought as he saw something rise up into the sky that made his blood run cold.

A great beam of blue light ascended high up above the battling forces, connected to the wands of six Death Eaters who stood in a tight circle behind the enemy lines. The beam converged on one point and then slowly morphed into a spherical object. It was about half the size of the Three Broomsticks and was seething with blue ripples. Trask knew instantly that this was dark magic, as he felt the heat from where he stood.

A second later the Death Eaters flicked their wands and the ball began to fall towards the front lines of the Aurors, a place where Trask now stood. "Oh... shit," he breathed, watching the fireball fall mercilessly. He heard someone run past him, shouting to raise shield charms but Dernas knew they would be useless against this.

It was then that his mind caught up with him, and he turned desperately, looking for a way out. Aurors were running all around him as the fireball was almost upon them. He saw them trip and fall over the bodies of the dead and injured, saw them raise shield charms quickly. They would not do much good. He had no way out, none of them did.

And then it hit him.

Praying that it was still there, Trask delved into his robes pocket and felt his hand grasp something long and thin. With a sigh of relief that lasted half a second, Trask pulled Harry's miniaturized Firebolt from his robe pocket. A second later and it was full size again, just as the fireball hit a group of Aurors ten feet away from him.

The shockwave sent him flying to the ground and the sound of the explosion almost deafened him, but miraculously he managed to hold onto the broom. Coughing slightly as he rose, Dernas enlarged the broom quickly and mounted it just as fast.

"Ha," he kicked off from the ground hard, just as the torrent of blue flames from the fireball washed over the road where a second ago he had stood. Dernas flew up ten feet and came to a hovering stop as his eyes connected with something devastating.

Remus Lupin lay sprawled out on the ground, resting on his elbows as the stream of searing hot blue fire gushed towards him. Trask saw that he had lost his wand and from the look on his face he had accepted what was about to happen.

Trask shook his head. This would not be happening. It had been many years since he had ridden a broom properly. The flight from the castle was definitely a quick refresher, but he thought he could do what he was about to do anyway. Pushing the broom forward, Dernas entered a short dive and the broom responded as he pulled up slightly. He was now flying barely a foot above the seething blue fire beneath him and the heat of it was burning his skin as he flew with its current towards the collapsed form of Remus Lupin.

Trask had to cover half the street and he knew it would be close. He had not had enough room to accelerate to any great speed but he was pushing it hard now. He was so close to the fire that the tail of the broom burst alight from the heat and sweat dripped from his forehead. He saw, barely three feet away now, the head of the stream and Remus fallen on his back with his eyes closed only four feet away.

"ARGH!" cried Trask, pushing the broom for one final burst of speed. He sped just ahead of the gushing blue fire and dropped his left arm, grasping onto any part of his fellow Order member that he could. His

hand connected with the scruff of Remus' robes, just around the collar, and with an almighty heave Dernas pointed the broom upwards and rocketed up away from the fire.

Remus's eyes opened in complete shock as he saw the ground retreating beneath him. "What...?" he whispered quickly, but then felt his stomach lurch as he began to fall again.

Trask struggled under the combined weight of Remus and the broom. The trajectory slowly arced and soon the tip of the broom was pointing again towards the ground. They had only risen about twenty-five feet. Holding onto Remus as strongly as he could, Dernas tried to aim the broom over the lines of Aurors and into the emptier part of the street that lay beyond.

The broom fell fast and so it picked up speed fast. Dernas and Remus fell fast and Trask was sure the fall would kill them both. Over the heads of the Aurors they fell, only just regrouping after the fireball attack. After a few seconds they cleared the Aurors but the ground was fast approaching, and they were travelling at too great a speed. *This is going to really hurt*, Trask thought.

The wind was screaming in his ears as he strained to keep hold of Remus and to slow the broom down. But it was no good. With a cry Trask pulled up as hard as he could on the broomstick as they past through a cloud of smoke, and he did feel them slow ever so slightly, but they were still going in too fast. And then they simply stopped.

Dernas stared at the ground six feet in front of him and his gaze travelled across and up from that. There stood Harry, his hand raised and the strain evident on his face.

Harry sighed with relief as he stopped Dernas and Remus from crashing hard into the ground, and then slowly lowered them the rest of the way. Remus felt his feet touch the ground and he stood shakily, turning to Trask who had promptly collapsed in a heap, breathing heavily.

"Thank you, Dernas," Remus said sincerely.

Dermas offered him a small smile but breathing took precedent over it. "No... problem..." he managed.

"Remus!" Lupin turned and saw Harry standing with Dumbledore. He nodded to them.

"That was close," Harry commented.

Remus nodded as Trask tried to stand. "Too close," he agreed and then offered Dermas his hand to help pull him to his feet.

"Should we return to the Aurors?" Remus asked Dumbledore, looking back at the struggling lines of fighters. There stood only three hundred left of the original eight hundred. It had been a god damn massacre.

Harry followed his gaze and after a moment of indecision he decided. "No," he said. "I have to find Ron, Hermione, and Ginny."

"What?" Remus said quickly.

"They could be anywhere, Harry," Dumbledore said gravely.

Harry shook his head. "No," he whispered. "Voldemort is close," he raised a hand to his scar. "I can feel him."

"Perhaps we should return to the castle," Remus said.

It was at that moment that a great cry went up from the Aurors. It started with one and soon the entire group began to move.

Kingsley let out a small cry as he was hit in his recently healed side. He had not had much time to rest after Harry had healed it and the battle was taking its toll on him. He had just seen two dozen good Aurors incinerated in the blast and his strength was wearing thin.

One thing he had noticed about the Death Eaters was that they had no problems using Dark magic. This put the Aurors at an immediate and huge disadvantage, as most dark magic is used to kill. He had not seen that fireball charm before and it was not taught in Auror training. He did not even have to think about the Unforgivables that they were using

either. They were devastating in their own right.

We're losing, Kingsley thought as he pulled a fallen Auror out of the fray. He recognised the man as the leader of the French Aurors, one of his lieutenants. No sooner had he pulled him out than he watched three more Aurors fall as they tried to dodge a barrage of Killing curses.

"DAMN IT!" Kingsley shouted. They were getting massacred in this close quarter fighting. He had to take the fighting somewhere else, break the Death Eaters into smaller groups instead of one large group capable of wiping out the Aurors. He had to bring the fight back, and the linear lay out of the street they now fought on could not do that.

Thinking fast and dodging curses, Kingsley thought of the landscape in the immediate area. He saw the castle and the Auror headquarters, there was the village of course and the road that ran parallel to the forest. *The forest...?* he wondered. *Could we...?*

He needed to break the Death Eater lines. If they fell back to the road and the forest, attacking from the protection of the trees just might do the trick. There were many downsides to this plan though. Primarily, it brought the Death Eaters closer to the school and Headquarters.

There is no other way... he thought, and tried to convince himself he was making the right choice. It could be the end of the fight either way. Kingsley made his choice.

"FALL BACK!" he shouted, running to the front line. "FALL BACK TO THE FOREST, TO THE ROAD!"

He ran down the length of the line, dodging the curses and shouting. "FALL BACK!"

It took him several seconds but soon the message began to relay throughout the Auror lines. As he ran, Kingsley saw the Death Eater mass begin to move forward, they were pushing for the kill. *This is not a defeat* he told himself as the Aurors began to move back down the street as well.

"BACK TO THE ROAD," he shouted. "BACK TO THE ROAD!"

And with that, the ranks broke. Turning fast the Aurors began to fall back. Firing a few final curses, they ran, and the Death eaters gave chase.

Harry watched the Auror lines break and begin to scatter. He heard the call to fall back to the road and realised the Aurors and Death Eaters would be heading this way and may even make it up to the school. *Hogwarts* he thought. *They won't know...*

"Professor," Harry began, turning to Dumbledore as he observed the rush of Aurors and Death Eaters heading towards them. "This could make it back up to Hogwarts."

"Indeed, Harry," Dumbledore replied solemnly. "We need to warn them."

Harry blinked and ran a hand through his hair, his jaw aching slightly even with the quick heal spell. "I'll go," he said finally. "But we have to find Voldemort."

Dumbledore nodded and then raised his wand. Harry watched as a shield momentarily raised itself between the Aurors and Death Eaters, giving them time to get away. "Warn Hogwarts, Harry," Dumbledore said. "Don't face him alone."

Harry paused as he saw the fear in Dumbledore's eyes. Fear for him. Shaking his head he cleared his mind and with a simple thought, Disapparated. After getting caught up in a fight that was not his, Harry was finally going back to Hogwarts. He reappeared almost instantly one mile away outside the Hogwarts castle gates, and set off at a run up the dirt road to the castle.

Harry felt strangely detached as he ran up to the castle. He ignored the pain in his leg but the world seemed eerily calm now. There was no smell of smoke or sounds of battle, there was no mass of duelling forces. There was nothing on the grounds, nothing at all. A false peace. Harry felt very odd having just come from the nightmare that was Hogsmeade.

He ran over the greening grass heralding a spring that was coming again after a long winter. Harry reached the castle and flung the doors open quickly, making straight for the Great Hall. He rubbed his jaw as the ache

in it worsened and entered the Great Hall.

The first thing he noticed was that the entire school was still in the hall. Dumbledore must have told McGonagall to keep them safe in the hall, where the staff could keep an eye on them. The next thing he noticed was that the tables were lined with food. The house elves had been busy. The final thing he noticed was, in fact, the time. It was twelve thirty. He had been in Hogsmeade over one and a half-hours. It had felt like a lifetime.

There were audible gasps from many in the Hall as he ran between the Gryffindor and Ravenclaw house tables. Harry realised he must look a bit under the weather. He wiped his cheek and winced as the crusted blood fell off. *That's right*, he thought. *Hit by a cutting charm there...*

"Potter?" McGonagall said, standing at the Staff table and shushing the rest of the school with a few hand movements. "You need to get to the Hospital wing."

Harry shook his head. "No," he told her and then quickly moved on. "Ron, Hermione and Ginny haven't returned, have they?" he asked hopefully as he drew level to the staff table. He saw Hagrid and Snape to McGonagall's left.

McGonagall frowned worriedly. "No, Potter," she said. "Oh dear..."

Harry felt his hope sink and for a moment he almost lost it. *It wasn't fair* he thought. *I can't lose them.... Not now* he told himself. *Other important things...* "Professor," he said quickly. "I've just come from Hogsmeade." Harry took a quick swig of pumpkin juice from what he presumed was usually Dumbledore's goblet. He was incredibly thirsty. "The battle has left Hogsmeade," he continued, lowering his voice so as not to alarm the one thousand students behind him. "It may spill over onto the grounds."

McGonagall paled slightly but then nodded. "Thank you, Potter," she said. "Now I am telling you to get to the Hospital wing."

Harry sighed and put his hands in his pockets. He frowned when he felt something he could not identify. Harry pulled the object out of his pocket and held it out before him. It only took him a moment to recognise what it

was and when he did he laid it out on the table in front of him, opening it up to its full width.

"This should help," he told McGonagall.

"What?" she asked confusedly. It was just a black piece of parchment.

"I solemnly swear that I am up to no good," Harry said, his palm stretched out across the Marauders Map.

"Pot-" McGonagall began but then stopped short as lines of ink began to whirl themselves across the parchment, and she realised what she was looking at.

"This is the Marauder's Map," Harry told her. "It shows the entire castle and all the grounds."

"I can see," she said. "It also shows the position of everyone on those grounds."

Harry nodded. He was glad she had understood so quickly. "Sirius, Remus and my father made it," he said with a hint of pride in his voice. "If anyone comes onto-"

Harry stopped and he felt his stomach do a flip as his eyes were drawn to the map. He felt as if he could not breathe as a name appeared just on the boundary of the map, where the grounds met the forest. He grasped the parchment hard and his eyes went round as what he saw really sunk in. He watched the small ink name tag take a few steps onto the grounds.

Ginevra Weasley

There was no mistaking it. Ginny had just come out of the forest. Harry stared at the map and was just about to turn and go and meet her when his blood ran cold. Two more names appeared on the map, just behind Ginny. Harry let out a cry and turned on the spot, throwing the map back onto the table carelessly. He sprinted across the Hall, ignoring the cries of his professors and classmates.

Pure fear shot through his veins as his mind grasped what he had just

seen. Ginny had come out of the Forbidden Forest, taken a few steps onto the grounds, and then barely five seconds later two more names had appeared on the map just behind her. Harry sped from the Hall, fear pushing him to go faster as the entire school broke out in whispers.

McGonagall frowned and looked down to the map on the table before her. She saw a moment later what it was that Harry had and she gasped, her hand covering her mouth. She saw the name of Ginevra Weasley heading back towards the forest, between two other names that realised her worst fears. Lucius Malfoy and Bellatrix Lestrange re-entered the forest and all three disappeared from the map.

Run Potter McGonagall thought, urging her young Gryffindor on. She saw on the map that he had just gone flying down the Entrance Hall stairs, but he would no longer find anyone on the castle grounds. For all his speed and magic he was already too late.

Two Hours Earlier

They were all connected. Malfoy held Ginny, Ron held Malfoy and Hermione held Ron. A brilliant flash of deep blue light later and they were gone. A few upturned desks the only evidence that anybody had been in the room.

For Ginny the world spun completely unexpectedly. She held her stomach as a barrage of lights swirled around her with a deafening roar. Closing her eyes against the dizziness, she waited for it to stop. A few seconds later it did, and she fell to the ground hard as the Portkey deposited her.

The first thing that hit Ginny was the cold. It pierced into her like a knife as she turned and looked up into the morning sun. Confusion settled upon her before realisation came crashing down hard. With a start she tried to sit up but immediately felt a pair of arms grasp her shoulders and she stifled a scream.

It became all too clear then. She looked around her surroundings and saw that she was sitting in a large clearing with great, twisted trees

forming the walls and hiding from sight anything but more trees. She lay on cold dirt that was sprouted with small shrubs and plants but for the most part was clear.

Ginny felt herself being pulled roughly to her feet and the world spinning again as she beheld the dark robed figures before her. A hand was in her pocket and she realised a moment too late that she had just lost her wand. She gasped as she recognised the masks of the Death Eaters and immediately began to struggle against whoever held her. To her left she saw Ron and Hermione, each being held by a Death Eater.

"What-" she began but was stopped as one of the masked Death Eaters struck her roughly across the cheek, causing her to cry out in shock and pain.

"BASTARD!" Ron spat, struggling to jump forward and attack the Death Eater who had just hit Ginny. But he was held tight and a second later magically conjured chains held him in place. He and Hermione had also had been disarmed. They were defenceless.

The Death Eater who had struck Ginny laughed, and removed his mask. Ron's fury increased as he saw the sneering, pointed face of Lucius Malfoy looking down upon him. Ginny and Hermione were chained around the wrists and ankles just like Ron and then thrown to the floor next to him.

"Draco," drawled Lucius Malfoy, turning to face his son who had just risen from the ground after the Portkey had deposited them. "You were only supposed to bring the Weasley girl."

Draco Malfoy looked up to his father angrily and wiped his lip of blood from a cut. Ron had gotten one lucky punch in back at Hogwarts. "I tried, father," he began, glaring at Ron. "But these two insisted on coming along."

Lucius Malfoy nodded. "No matter, Draco," he began, looking down at Ron, Hermione and Ginny with a look of disgust upon his face. "The Dark Lord will be pleased we have Potter's closest friends. You will be rewarded well."

Draco's eyes lit up expectantly and he nodded once to his father as he held his burst lip, before turning away without giving Ron, Hermione or Ginny another look.

Ginny looked around the clearing fearfully as she saw all the black robed figures moving across it. She counted at least a dozen, all busy waving their wands conjuring large stones into place. She frowned at this but had no time to think about it, Ron was speaking.

"Where's Harry?" he asked Lucius Malfoy quickly.

Malfoy's sneer increased. "No doubt he will be joining us soon, Weasley. The Dark Lord will use you three to destroy him." Malfoy then walked away, leaving the three of them alone, but under the watchful eye of all in the clearing.

Hermione looked around herself nervously, trying to weigh her options. There were no good ones. She had no wand, she was bound at her feet so she could not run, and Death Eaters were everywhere. "This isn't good," she whispered and Ron nodded.

"You okay, Ginny?" he asked.

Ginny nodded ever so slightly and desperately looked around for a way out. All she saw were Death Eaters. "What are we going to do?" she whispered to Hermione and Ron.

Ron tried to shrug but his arms were chained too close together behind his back. He sighed in frustration. "We're just going to have to wait for now," he said resolutely. "Harry will come with the Order."

Hermione bit her bottom lip and hoped that Harry would prove Ron right. Her mind kept flipping back to the Ministry all those months ago, and more recently to the destruction in her hometown of Abingdon. The Death Eaters had been ruthless, and here they were, prisoners of Voldemort's inner circle.

Minutes passed slowly as the Death Eaters moved around the clearing, muttering incantations and clearing it of vegetation. They were preparing it for something. Ron was not sure he wanted to know what. Knowing Voldemort, it would not be good. Occasionally he pulled on his chains

and instructed Ginny and Hermione to do the same

The Death Eaters talked quietly amongst themselves and Ron did not have to struggle to hear what they were saying. Their voices carried quite clearly across the clearing. What he, Hermione and Ginny heard was not comforting.

"Things go well in Hogsmeade," a familiar voice said. Ron placed it as Bellatrix Lestrange.

"Indeed," Lucius Malfoy replied. "The Aurors have little protection against our dark magic. Our Lord will be pleased."

Bellatrix nodded behind her mask. "Where is he?"

Lucius nodded away into the trees on his left. "Preparing for the spell this afternoon. It is going to take a huge amount of raw power."

Ron sighed in frustration at the situation but Hermione's mind was working furiously. *The Death Eaters were attacking Hogsmeade* she thought. If she strained she could hear faint explosions and occasionally the sound of a scream or curse. *That has to be Hogsmeade* she rationalised. *Which means this is the Forbidden Forest* she realised, looking around at the thick trees in all directions.

"Ron, Ginny," she whispered. "Do you recognise this place?"

Ron frowned. "It's a forest," he said simply.

"It's the Forbidden Forest," Ginny added, looking around herself for anything that might tell them what part of the forest they were now captive in. "But the forest is huge, we could be anywhere!" she exclaimed.

Hermione shook her head. "I don't think so..." she whispered thoughtfully. "If you listen carefully you can hear the battle at Hogsmeade. We're closer to Hogwarts than you may think."

"We have to escape," Ron said quickly after that. "I don't know what they're doing here, but it probably won't be good for Harry. We have to get back to the castle."

Ginny and Hermione nodded, carefully eyeing all the Death Eaters they could see. "The sounds from Hogsmeade are coming from over there," Ron nodded straight ahead and into the trees across the clearing from them. "Where does that put the castle?"

Hermione fell into quick, deep thought. Her mind flicked through all of the geography of the area and she hazarded a guess as to in which direction Hogwarts castle lay. "That way," she nodded after a moment, looking to their right. "Hogwarts is through those trees."

"Now all we have to do is get these chains off," Ron said, struggling with his cuffs. They burned into his skin and only got tighter as he pulled on them. "And make a break for it without wands with You-Know-Who's inner circle right behind us."

"Or if one of us could get away..." Hermione speculated, looking at Ron and Ginny respectively. She saw that Ginny was the only one of them with her hands cuffed in front of her, giving her more movement. "And then get help."

Ron shook his head angrily. "It all rests on getting these damn chains off though," he said bitterly. "Which," he continued struggling against his restraints and wincing as they bit into him, "is impossible."

Ginny sighed and felt her voice get caught in her throat as the full realisation of the hopelessness of their situation hit her. The Death Eaters were going to use them to bring Harry to his death. And Harry would come, she knew that. Even if he knew he was going to die he would still come and try. That was just Harry.

An hour passed, maybe more. Ron was not sure as he struggled tirelessly against the chains binding him. They were magically enchanted to burn whenever strained so Ron was doing more damage than good, but he had to try. For Hermione's and Ginny's sake he had to try. It was not long after that that he had begun to smell smoke and he knew that Hogsmeade was burning.

The Death Eaters around the clearing had been keeping an eye on all three of them for the past hour and seemed satisfied that they would not escape. If they escaped the Dark Lord would not be happy, and that was

to be avoided at all costs. Draco Malfoy walked around the clearing with his father, burning away the vegetation. For what purpose he did not know but if the Dark Lord commanded it, it would be done.

He kept a wary eye on the three Gryffindors he had brought here with the Portkey. If he had learnt one thing over the years at Hogwarts, it was that they had a nasty habit of surviving. He watched them whispering amongst themselves and how foolishly Weasley pulled against his chains. It only tightened them.

Ginny's mind was a kaleidoscope of images. Most of them held Harry and she could not help but wish for him to come and save her again, like he had in the Chamber. The fear of the situation made her feel sick and nervous sweat broke out on her forehead. She had no idea how Harry had survived so long when he must feel like this all the time. It was worry for her own life, and that of Ron and Hermione that had her scared now.

She and Harry had only just accepted one another. Years of waiting and silent regret and he had finally noticed her. They had come together when Harry was so close to the edge. In fact she would go as far to say as he was hanging on by his fingertips. Their stolen moments were all that had mattered over the past few weeks. Ginny saw him kissing her in the small window alcove on the seventh floor, and quickly before the DA meetings. He made time for her no matter what else he had to do and he always seemed to know just exactly what to say.

Ginny saw him training out on the grounds with Derms, the look of sheer concentration upon his face mixed with the understanding that all the training he pushed himself through would one day help him. She hoped today would not be that day, and if it was she hoped he lived through it. She hoped they all did.

Ginny sighed and let a silent tear fall from her eye and roll down her cheek into the corner of her mouth. *It wasn't fair!* she found herself thinking for the thousandth time. Harry was still just a kid and yet he was supposed to save the world, to destroy Voldemort. He did not deserve the hand Fate had dealt him.

Feeling an unexpected surge of anger, Ginny found herself focusing completely and entirely on breaking free of her bonds and running to

Harry. She screamed in frustration as the chains around her wrists and ankles just got tighter for all her efforts. Her scream had of course attracted the Death Eaters but they were simply laughing at her futile attempts to escape.

"Calm down, Gin," Ron said worriedly. "It'll only get tighter," he explained, his own wrists having almost lost circulation.

"I have to see him!" Ginny cried desperately. "He doesn't deserve it," she continued. "We have to tell him not to come..."

Ginny thrashed and pulled at the chains but only succeeded in strengthening the hold they had upon her. She was frantic now, pulling at them with all her might and getting nowhere. She was practically seething as the chains burnt her skin and began to feel something welling up inside of her. It was a feeling she had never had before, like a caged animal desperate for release.

With a cry she pulled one final time and kicked her legs out hard. In that one moment the feeling of power inside of her exploded viciously and quickly and the chains around her ankles exploded shattering into dust, freeing her legs.

Surprise and shock emanated from all that had witnessed this. Ginny just simply stared at her free ankles in confusion. She had not done any accidental magic for years, and it was rare even then. Unexpectedly, it was Ron who came to his senses first.

"RUN, GINNY!" he shouted loudly, struggling once more against his own bonds. Hermione repeated it and Ginny jumped to her feet, holding her bound hands in front of her.

"Towards the trees," Hermione said, pointing with her head. "Hogwarts is through that way."

Ginny did not need telling twice. She felt a moment's hesitation at leaving Ron and Hermione but if she did not go they could all be doomed. The Death Eaters had also come to their senses and were raising their wands just as Ginny got to her feet.

"STUPEFY!" cried Lucius Malfoy and Bellatrix Lestrange in unison. Two

equally powerful beams of red light shot across the clearing, straight towards Ginny as she began to run.

"Go for it, Gin!" Ron said quickly, jumping up onto his knees with his ankles and wrists still bound. He threw himself the short way through the air and in front of Ginny, taking both stunners to the chest.

Ron was out cold instantly and Ginny set off at a sprint over and into the trees. She pushed back the tears at leaving Ron and Hermione at the mercy of Voldemort's inner circle, but she knew what her mission was now. She had to get to Harry, to the Order and bring them back to the forest.

Ginny pushed into the trees and was soon enveloped in the dark canopy. She heard the shouts of the Death Eaters behind her and knew they were coming after her.

"NOTT!" bellowed Malfoy. "STUN THE MUDBLOOD AND THEN INTO THE FOREST!"

Ginny began to breathe heavily as she ran across the leaf strewn ground of the forest. The recently departed winter had left a thin layer of icy snow still covering most of the ground in the darker parts of the forest, where she now ran. She still had her hands shackled in front of her and was completely defenceless as she heard the Death Eaters behind her.

Putting on a burst of speed but being careful not to tire herself out, Ginny tried to put some distance between her and her pursuers. The ground raced beneath her and she barely registered in what direction her legs took her. Her concentration was devoted to not tripping on any of the knotted roots that stuck up in the ground. She heard the hurried steps of the Death Eaters behind her and tried to increase her pace.

The castle can't be that far away she thought hopefully. She could get there, and get to Harry and stop him from fighting today. It wasn't right. He isn't ready. As strong as he may appear he can't do it yet. A thousand outcomes to a battle with Voldemort flashed through her mind and she saw Harry die each time. These thoughts urged her on and as she ducked under a branch, she felt the hot sting of a curse explode on the branch above her.

The Death Eaters pushed through the forest behind her, knowing that if she escaped the Dark Lord's wrath would be terrible. Lucius Malfoy was the closest and he fired a stunning spell at the youngest Weasley as she disappeared under a tree branch. Swearing as he missed, Lucius continued the chase.

Ginny ran with a purpose. She had to get to Harry and get the Order to save Ron and Hermione. She felt her shackles burning into her skin as she ran and threw her hands about to avoid the forest foliage. Tears of pain sprang to her eyes but she ignored it stoically for now. It was more important she escape.

The forest trees and bushes rushed past her and she was breathing heavily. The forest seemed to have no end as she lost count of how long she had been running. A thought came to her that perhaps she was running deeper into the forest, away from the castle.

Ginny strained her eyes ahead against the impenetrable darkness of the forest, to see if it came to an end. She could still hear the Death Eaters closing in fast behind her and the thought of recapture and this being all for naught urged her on faster than she had gone before.

Gradually the trees began to thin around her and up ahead Ginny could see daylight. She took a deep shuddering breath that was filled with hope and willed herself to carry on. She did not remember feeling so winded but the effort of her run was starting to take its toll and she pushed against the stitch that had developed in her side.

The trees had thinned to almost nothing now and her heart rose at the brief glimpse of Hogwarts castle she could see about half a mile away. Determination blossoming in her heart, Ginny gave her all to run out of the forest. The forest simply ended and the trees around her disappeared as the vast expanse of the Hogwarts grounds appeared before her.

With a smile she saw Hagrid's cabin and the lake across the grounds and the castle in its full glory before her. Slowing, Ginny used what little strength she had left and set out across the grounds at a jog, as running had become much too painful. In her mind she could not believe she had made it so far.

The castle was just ahead. Harry would be there. This thought kept her going a few more steps, before the world abruptly went dark, and she knew no more.

"Grab her," Malfoy hissed to Bellatrix as the two of them emerged from the forest, having just fired a stunning spell and hitting Ginny hard.

Bellatrix ran out onto the grounds with Lucius following carefully behind her. His grey eyes surveyed the grounds arrogantly, searching for any witnesses. Unfortunately the grounds were empty, and Lucius and Bellatrix had soon levitated Ginny's prone form back into the forest.

Harry raced from the castle, throwing open the great oak doors as he ran for the grounds. He had seen Ginny on the map. He had *seen* her. She was alive and had to have been in the forest. Possibly with Ron and Hermione as well.

Harry had seen her name briefly on the map and it had warmed his heart with relief as she had appeared on the grounds. That hope was crushed viciously only a moment later when the names of Lucius Malfoy and Bellatrix Lestrange had followed.

Reaching the gravel path outside the castle, Harry looked down to the border of the forest as he ran. He looked towards the gate where he knew she had emerged. Nothing but a cool wind stirred upon the icy ground. Harry bit his lip in frustration and fear. He prayed that Ginny hadn't been hurt for running, and he had no doubt that she had made a bid for freedom. That was simply Ginny.

Harry ran for a few feet and then in the blink of an eye transformed into the mighty griffin. With a deafening roar and screech he kicked two claws and two muscular paws off from the ground and spread his strong, thin wings. A few feathers fell from his form as he took flight and sped off across the grounds. He flew higher into the air with the wind and desperately hoped to view Ginny with his piercing eagle eyes.

Harry roared again as he knew she had been taken back into the forest. He had a rough idea where they would be heading in their though, and

was just about to fly over the forest in hopes of seeing anything when his eyes locked onto the battle now raging on the road to Hogsmeade.

A brief moment of indecision fluttered through Harry's mind as he had to make a choice. He wanted, more than anything else, to get the people he loved away from the clutches of Voldemort. He wanted to charge into the forest palms blazing and hurt those who had dared to harm his friends. That is what he wanted to do, but the more rational part of his mind made him listen before he dived into the forest as a griffin.

Going alone he risked losing it all. He could not protect his friends and duel Voldemort at the same time. The Death Eaters would most likely harm his friends to distract him. He had to get somebody to come with him, anybody. They could get his friends away while he dealt with Voldemort.

Harry flew high above the grounds providing him with an impressive view of the battle on the road beneath him. He saw the mass of Death Eaters marching up the road as the Aurors retreated back to a defensive wall behind which other Aurors were now stationed, providing defensive charms and shields to the retreating Aurors.

Harry gasped at the destruction the Death Eaters were leaving in their wake. The village of Hogsmeade lay in smouldering ruins and was completely covered in a canopy of thick black smoke. The forest on the verges of the road where the Death Eaters now marched was also going up in roaring flames. The orange flames rose up high and spread slowly over the icy trees.

Lights and screams lit up and rang along the road. Barrages of different coloured curses were exchanged between the two fighting forces. Making his decision, Harry veered left on the wind and began his descent towards the battle-strewn road. As he descended he promised himself he would not linger. He would find someone to come with him, preferably Dumbledore and head into the forest after Ginny.

Harry followed the wind and with a roar fell onto the road just before the barricaded wall the Aurors had erected. It was just short of the headquarter building that separated Hogwarts from Hogsmeade. This was the Aurors last stand before Hogwarts.

The Aurors behind the wall and those in front of it were momentarily distracted by his presence and even more so when he reverted to human form. Harry did not wait to explain himself though. He set off down the road towards the approaching Death Eater army, his palms already tingling with magic.

As he ran, Harry assessed his situation and did a quick check of himself for injuries. He knew that the quick heal spell he had cast on his jaw would last a few more hours but he had several cuts and bruises that were beginning to ache from his constant exertion. He ran past Aurors who were firing hexes at the Death Eaters and dodging curses that were thick in the air.

Harry realised he was limping slightly as he ran but that would have to wait. He had to find Dumbledore, find anybody to come with him. The Death Eaters were advancing up the road fast, using the Aurors retreat to attack hard. For their part the Aurors were doing their best to fight back but they were spread out too far and only a brave few remained at the head of the fight. Harry knew that was where he would find Dumbledore.

Aurors were rushing past him, holding wounds or carrying fallen friends. The air was heavy with curses and some of these retreating fighters were hit in the back as they tried to escape. Harry watched angrily as many fell. He turned his attention to the swarm of Death Eaters barely fifty feet away now.

"Declino!" he cried, jumping over the fallen body of an Auror, while saving the life of another with his deflection spell.

The sounds of battle reverberated in Harry's ears as he ran ever closer to the centre of the fight. His eyes scanned the crowds for Dumbledore, Remus, or Derris. For anybody that could help him. He saw Kingsley and Tonks holding a group of Death Eaters back while other Aurors escaped. He was slightly relieved to know that Kingsley had survived but had no time to help him.

"Cusindeo!" Harry said, breaking a nearby Death Eaters wand arm and saving the life of yet another Auror.

Harry was getting worried. He was being drawn into the fight again, something he could not afford to do. His friends could be being tortured or worse as he fought here. *What am I going to do?* he thought, running past a group of advancing Death Eaters and heading on towards the main fighting force. *Save them* he told himself strongly. *I'm going to save-*

BOOM!

Harry gasped as the very earth shook under his feet and knocked him hard to the ground. Several fused reductor curses had just exploded a few feet to his left, scattering Aurors and maiming others. Harry coughed as ash was thrown into his face and the rubble cut his skin as it rocketed over him.

His ears rang for a moment as he struggled to get back onto his feet. Aurors were lying dead around him and Harry wondered briefly how he had survived the blast. He was not left wondering long though as he heard a familiar voice behind him.

Harry whirled around fast and saw Dermas Trask standing two feet away, his wand raised and casting another shield charm. His last one had just saved Harry's life. "DERMAS!" Harry called.

"YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO BE AT THE CASTLE!" Trask cried over the sounds of battle.

Harry shook his head. "THEY'RE IN THE FOREST."

Dermas frowned. "WHAT?"

"RON, HERMIONE AND GINNY," Harry replied. "THEY'RE BEING HELD IN THE FOREST."

Trask nodded and cast a severing charm that cut a Death Eaters throat as he wrestled with a nearby Auror. He then ran back down the street away from the advancing Death Eaters, and motioned Harry to do the same. They retreated to a good distance, not exactly safe but not as loud.

"And what are we going to do, Harry?" he asked, panting to catch his

breath. "Voldemort will be there."

Harry looked into the forest on his right. "I'm counting on it," he said cryptically. "Look, Trask, I can go alone but I'll die. And trust me, I will go!" Harry stared deep into Dernas' eyes, determination shining in his. "I owe it to them for standing by me all these years. I'm not going to lose them." Harry knew he sounded slightly frantic but he did not care. "I just need help...."

Trask stared at Harry for a moment and then cursed under his breath. "We should really tell Dumbledore," he said, a frown appearing on his forehead.

"Where is he?" Harry asked quickly.

Trask bit his lower lip in worry. "Hogsmeade, evacuating the injured with Portkeys."

Harry shook his head. "I don't think my friends have that long," he said, and as if on queue, his scar rippled with pain. "He's hurting them," Harry whispered and then took two quick steps forward, planning on leaving now with or without Trask. He paused for only a moment when he felt a hand on his shoulder.

"All right, Harry," Dernas said. "But how are we going to find them in the forest?"

Harry blinked and winced as his scar burnt viciously. He knew that Voldemort was calling him. "Get on my back," was all he said to Trask. A brief second later and he had transformed into the magnificent griffin, a rough screech coming from his eagle beak.

Harry took a few steps forward and looked from the fleeing Aurors, to the approaching Death Eaters, and finally to the hesitating form of Dernas Trask. He screeched again and inclined his head at Dernas. It took Dernas a bit of an effort to throw himself onto Harry's lion back. He fell on just below the wing joints and grasped his neck feathers tightly.

Not wasting another valuable second, Harry began to run up the road towards the Auror barricade. It did not take him long to gather speed and, bracing his back legs, he pushed off from the ground hard, his wings

spreading and flapping furiously. For his part, Dermal held onto Harry a little tighter that was probably necessary. He had ridden a broom for the first time in a decade that morning, he was riding a griffin for the first time in his life now.

Harry took off and immediately began gaining height above the forest. He ignored the extra weight that Dermal provided and they had both soon left the horrific battle behind. Harry could still feel his scar burning, even though it was no longer visible. The link he shared with Voldemort still existed even when he wasn't in human form.

They were soon over one hundred feet into the air and the Death Eater army on the Hogsmeade road just looked like one big black mass. Harry saw the castle to his right and mile after mile of forest beneath him. His sharp eyes flew over the entire expanse, searching for any sign of his friends.

Dermal remained silent on his back, although with the wind in his ears Harry doubted he would have been able to hear him anyway. They made slow progress and stayed relatively close to the road as they searched. Harry did not know what he was looking for, only that wherever he found his friends, he would find Voldemort.

With his sharp eyes it did not take Harry long to notice an irregularity in the foliage of the forest. He saw a clearing, a circular clearing in an otherwise densely covered area. He swooped in lower staying hidden in front of the sun so as not to be seen. He dropped to just above tree top level and his blood ran cold as he saw the hooded figure standing tall above three unmoving forms, two of them with vivid flame red hair.

Harry cried in rage as his scar burned. He knew Voldemort was torturing them. He knew they were suffering for being his friend. He knew he was going to do anything to save their lives. A part of him wanted to just fly in there now, but he realised this was going to take something more. He needed to be fast to save them, and as such he needed surprise on his side.

Harry swooped down out of the sky and broke through the canopy of trees. He landed about fifty feet away to the left of the clearing and waited a moment while Trask got off of his back before transforming

back into a human.

"Did you see them?" Harry asked.

Trask nodded. "I did. I counted about a dozen Death Eaters and Voldemort himself." Trask looked at Harry seriously after that. "Whatever you're thinking, Harry, I hope it doesn't involve trading your life for your friends."

Harry did not answer, but began moving through the dark forest towards the clearing they had seen from the sky. "We'll see what happens," he shrugged. "I know he'll kill my friends even if I did offer a trade, so we'll just see what happens."

Dermas shook his head. "Don't do anything foolish."

Harry moved with purpose through the sparse trees and bushes. "Define foolish," he said and Trask smiled slightly.

"There is a very good chance we're about to die," he warned, almost slipping on the icy ground.

Harry shrugged again. "We've just come from the biggest magical battle being fought on this planet and you've only just realised that?"

Trask sighed heavily and gripped his wand hard. In a few moments he would be closer to his fiancée's murderer than he had been for twenty years. He was understandably nervous.

It took Harry and Dermas five minutes to navigate through the forest quietly, though they could not be sure that they hadn't tripped any warning wards the Death Eaters might have set. Harry was confident that they hadn't, as he had not felt the familiar tingle that he always felt when passing through wards.

Harry knew they were close as he ducked under a low hanging branch. His scar was burning viciously and he could hear laughter up ahead. It was cold laughter though, and it sent a chill right through Trask. He could also hear a desperate scream. Harry knew without a doubt that it was Ron.

They approached slowly, a growing feeling of dread and nervousness developing in both of their stomachs. The silence was only broken by the laughter and screams from up ahead. Harry had to clench his fists against the anger inside of him. He wanted to just run out there now. Damn the consequences. He wanted his friends out of harms way. Dermas sensed this, and placed a restraining hand on his shoulder.

"We need to see what we're running in to," he whispered.

Harry said nothing but pushed a small branch out of the way giving himself perfect view of the clearing. He noticed several things at once. It was covered in Death Eaters, his friends were in the middle, and Voldemort was standing over them, his wand drawn.

Harry heard Trask's quick intake of breath and for a moment he was at a loss as to what to do. He knew that Dermas was waiting for him but now that Harry had come to it he realised just too much was unknown, too many risks had to be taken. He forced himself to calm down and in the small moments in which the mind works he assessed the situation.

Okay, he told himself. Think!

Who is your enemy?

Voldemort and the Death Eaters.

Why are they here?

To kill me. Using my friends as bait to draw me to them.

What options do you have?

Not many. It's only me and Trask here; but we can't leave them to be tortured.

Damn it! Harry cried to himself. The biggest problem he had was getting his friends out of harms way. *I have only Trask to work with.* Harry turned and looked Trask up and down. *They don't know he's here...* Harry thought quickly, the beginnings of a plan forming in his mind.

Harry looked back into the clearing and was thankful for the darkness under the trees in which he stood. He could use it to his advantage. He

saw Voldemort standing above Ron now, as he placed himself in front of Hermione and Ginny, shielding them from Voldemort. The Death Eaters were silent as Voldemort spoke and Harry forced himself to listen.

"Where is your hero now?" Voldemort asked of Ron, who seemed incapable of answering. "*Crucio!*" Ron began screaming and thrashing around on the ground, his shackles tightening as he moved.

"Harry will come!" Ginny shouted and took Voldemort's attention away from Ron, breaking the thread of the Cruciatus.

"I know he will, child," Voldemort answered. "His love has forever been his weakness."

Harry turned quickly to Trask who was watching Voldemort with a murderous glint in his eye. "Listen quickly, Dermal," Harry said, his voice nothing more than a low whisper. The closest Death Eater was only fifteen feet away. "I've got a -er- plan..."

Trask stared at Harry for a moment. "Whenever you're ready..." he said, raising an eyebrow.

"I want you to walk around the edge of the clearing, stay in the trees so you won't be seen," Harry began. "Get as close as you can to Ron, Hermione and Ginny. You have to get those shackles off of them and then escape into the forest back to Hogwarts."

Dermal stared at Harry again for a long moment and clicked his teeth. "Right..." he said, his forehead settling into a frown. "And while I'm out there eating an Avada Kedavra sandwich," he continued matter of factly. "What will you be doing?"

Harry smiled and shook his head. "I'm going to create a distraction," was all he said.

"Care to elaborate?" Dermal asked, beginning to walk away around the clearing.

"Voldemort wants me," Harry answered. "He's going to get me,"

Once Dermal was out of sight beneath the dark canopy, Harry turned back to Voldemort and took a deep breath. He saw that he was talking to Ginny and he listened closely, waiting for his opportunity. It wasn't until he heard what Voldemort was saying to Ginny, that he threw all caution to the wind and ran through the undergrowth of the forest and out into the clearing.

Fifteen Minutes Earlier

Ron shook his head as he worked off the after effects of two stunners to the chest. He felt woozy and slightly sick but he was conscious. He sighed heavily when he saw both Ginny and Hermione still lying next to him in the clearing.

"You awake, Ron?" asked Hermione.

Ron nodded and tried to sit up, but the shackles bit into his skin. "You didn't get very far, Ginny? They didn't hurt you did they?"

Ginny shook her head and for a moment looked utterly defeated. "I made it to the grounds but they stunned me in the back."

"How long was I out?" Ron asked.

Hermione shrugged. "I've only just been revived," she said.

"About half an hour," Ginny told him.

Just then a Death Eater walked passed them and he hissed under his breath. "No talking, the Dark Lord approaches."

Ron shuddered and looked helplessly at Hermione and Ginny. He wished they were not here, he wished it was just him if it had to be anybody. His fear for them grew as he realised they were about to meet Voldemort. The very evil that plagued their world and he was soon going to be here.

Harry had seen him many times, but Ron hadn't once. He had grown up on stories of the terror that Voldemort had wrought upon the world, most of them quite horrific. He had seen enough in his own experiences of the

war over the past few years. He knew it was not going to be good.

He looked over to Hermione and Ginny and saw equal fear and nervousness upon their faces. Ron knew he probably looked the same but he was going to do his best to protect them.

He took a deep breath and suppressed a shudder. "Any last minute plans, Hermione?" he asked quietly.

Hermione looked at him with glazed eyes and shook her head. "Not unless you have a wand, Ron."

Ron shook his head. "It'll be all right," he whispered, trying to reassure himself as well. "I'm sure Dumbledore and the Order are on the way...." his voice trailed away to nothing at the end and his gaze was inexplicably drawn to a bunch of trees to his right. Hermione and Ginny also followed him, feeling the urge to look that way.

They waited a long moment and nothing stirred at the trees. Ron vaguely noticed that all the Death Eaters had stopped moving and were also staring at the trees. He frowned, knowing that it was not his own will at work. Something else was forcing him to look into the trees.

The forest was silent. Ron found it unnerving that not even a bird was chirping in the trees. No wind blew. There was absolutely no sound except for heavy breathing coming from Hermione. It was then that Ron felt a wave of piercing cold spread over him and he gasped as the light around the trees he was staring at seemed to dim.

A darker colour than the natural darkness beneath the trees seemed to envelop the small grove and the cold increased. Ron shivered as he saw the foliage and low hanging branches of the trees bend away unnaturally and then heard footsteps hidden in the darkness.

The footsteps approached slowly, with an air of power about them that drained the very air of its warmth. Ron watched as a figure darker than the failing light around the trees could ever be emerged from within the forest.

Nothing. Absolutely nothing had prepared him for the sight that met his

eyes. Harry had described it when pushed, but nothing ever came close in Ron's imaginings as to the appearance of Lord Voldemort. He stifled a scream as those merciless red eyes swept over him, filling him with fear.

The Dark Lord was robed in the darkest robes and only his eyes were visible beneath his hood. Hermione watched with an absolute terror as the Death Eaters fell to their knees as he appeared. She had heard her mother give a description of Voldemort after seeing him at Christmas but seeing him for herself terrified her beyond all comprehension. For one brief moment she knew what it felt like to stare pure evil in the face, and have it stare back at you.

Ginny trembled and shook as the creature that had grown up from Tom Riddle entered the clearing. He was hideous. Sunlight seemed to avoid him as he walked, drawing it into a darkness that emanated from him. His eyes were blood red and cut right through her. She trembled again as every story she had ever read or heard about this demon sped through her mind.

Ron, Hermione and Ginny had never been more terrified in all the years they had been alive.

"My Lord," said Lucius Malfoy, approaching Voldemort.

"How go things, Lucius?" Voldemort asked. His voice was like ice.

Malfoy bowed again to the Dark Lord. "News says your Death Eaters have pushed the Aurors as far back as the castle."

Voldemort nodded. "Excellent," he hissed. "And your son? I trust he completed his task satisfactorily."

Lucius Malfoy nodded quickly and motioned behind him. Ron watched as Draco Malfoy appeared from under the bows of the trees to his left. He walked over to his father and bowed low when he came to Voldemort. "He has not only brought the Weasley girl, my Lord," Lucius said as Draco rose. "But also Potter's closest friends." Malfoy then motioned to the three tightly bound forms of Ron, Hermione and Ginny across the clearing.

"Fortunate," Voldemort said quietly. "Well done, Master Malfoy," he

hissed, looking Draco in the eyes. "Though I expect nothing less from those in my service. You shall receive your Mark when our work here is done."

Draco could not hold Voldemort's gaze for long. He looked down to the ground as he spoke. "Thank you, my Lord," he said without any hesitation.

Voldemort nodded and turned away from both Malfoys. "Bring our guests," he called to the Death Eaters closest to Ron, Hermione and Ginny.

Ron did not try to struggle as he was levitated over to the ground beneath Voldemort. He did nothing but stare at the Dark Lord, his fear growing to absolute terror. Hermione and Ginny were likewise silent as they were dropped at the feet of the demon.

Ginny looked defiantly into Voldemort's eyes, using every ounce of courage she possessed not to look away. Ron and Hermione did the same.

"Such defiance in three so young," Voldemort mused, twirling his wand in his hands.

Ron, Hermione and Ginny remained silent as Voldemort walked around them. The Death Eaters had moved in closer around them as well, standing at strategic points around the clearing.

"Not speaking, I see," Voldemort said, looking at Ron. "If Potter were here I would expect some last minute bravado to say the least."

"Harry will be here," Ron said, feeling brave for a moment.

Voldemort's eyes pierced through him, it was all Ron could see of his face. "Indeed," he whispered. "He will come to his death."

"No..." Ron shot back. He felt that if he was going to die he was not going out quietly. "He will come to destroy you."

Voldemort simply laughed as Hermione and Ginny gasped. "*Crucio!*"

Ron felt pain beyond pain. His very bones were on fire as his nerve

endings exploded and his skin boiled. It was everything Harry and Moody had described and so much worse at the same time. He wanted nothing more than for it to stop. He would have welcomed death over the searing pain now ripping through him.

Hermione stifled a cry as Ron writhed in pain on the ground. After what felt like an eternity, Voldemort broke the connection and left Ron gasping for breath.

Voldemort was laughing again. It was a cold laugh, full of hate and malice. "You will die first after Potter, Weasley," the Dark Lord said. "And it will not be painless."

Ron seemed incapable of speaking as he shuddered violently from the after effects of the Cruciatus. The Death Eaters around the circle were laughing as well and the sound of it cut right through Hermione.

"Harry *will* defeat you," she spat, anger in her own voice. "He has more power than you'll ever-"

"*Crucio!*" Voldemort cried again for the second time that afternoon. Hermione instantly fell back and began to scream in absolute agony. This roused Ron and he struggled to put himself in front of the curse, in an effort to stop Hermione's pain.

"Stop it," Ron said desperately. "STOP IT!" he shouted.

"Where is your hero now?" Voldemort asked of Ron, breaking the connection with Hermione. "*Crucio!*" Ron again screamed and thrashed on the ground, his shackles tightening as he moved.

"Harry will come!" Ginny shouted, diverting Voldemort's attention from Ron, breaking the thread of the Cruciatus again.

"I know he will, child," Voldemort answered. "His love has forever been his weakness."

Ginny paled and squirmed under Voldemort's murderous glare. "Did you think you and Potter could hide it from me?" Voldemort questioned. "I see everything in his worthless mind. We are connected by magic so deep that it truly runs beyond this world."

"I-" began Ginny.

"I felt his love for you," Voldemort hissed. "My Death Eaters confirmed it. Your fate was sealed the moment you came together."

Ron tried to speak but all that came out was a deep groan. Ginny spoke for him. "That doesn't matter," she said quickly. "He'll save us and destroy you!"

Voldemort merely smiled, and his eyes narrowed. There was something in the way he glared that made Ron, Hermione and Ginny feel absolutely terrified. It was something they had never seen before; it was the glint of a madman. Ginny blanched under that gaze and realised all too late that this was happening too fast.

"He'll save you?" Voldemort repeated, clenching his wand hard, the end pointed at Ginny. "Perhaps there will be nothing to save..."

"What-" Hermione tried to speak but she was cut off.

Voldemort smiled mercilessly, though nobody saw it from underneath the darkness of his hood. "I believe, Ginevra Weasley," Voldemort hissed. "That young Mr. Potter will be joining us shortly. Your hero will come, and expect to find you alive as bargaining chips in our ever growing battle."

Ginny felt her blood run cold as Voldemort turned those murderous eyes to Ron and then Hermione and then finally back to her. "He'll come..." she whispered to herself.

"However," Voldemort continued. "I believe I may need to do something *much* more drastic to draw our hero out." The Dark Lord's face lit up with a smile and he slowly lowered his hood to the three captive friends. They all gasped in terror at the snake like face before them. "I'm going to kill you," he hissed dangerously, and there was no lie in his voice. "I'm going to kill you... and Harry Potter, will come."

And with that, Voldemort stood up to his full height and pointed his wand directly between Ginny's eyes. Ginny saw the spell forming on his lips and she closed her eyes as Ron struggled frantically to move in front of her. *Harry* she thought. *I'm sorry.*

Once Dermal was out of sight beneath the dark canopy, Harry turned back to Voldemort and took a deep breath. He saw that he was talking to Ginny and he listened closely, waiting for his opportunity. It wasn't until he heard what Voldemort was saying to Ginny, that he threw all caution to the wind and ran through the undergrowth of the forest and out into the clearing.

Harry ran out with no other thought in his mind other than to stop Voldemort. He had heard what was said, and for one terrifying moment he thought he was going to be too late. "VOLDEMORT!" he shouted as he saw the words forming on his enemy's lips. "I'm here..."

Voldemort and the Death Eaters turned so fast that Harry almost did not see it. He could tell that they were surprised, as many were now fumbling for their wands. Voldemort wasn't though; he had his wand trained on Harry immediately.

"Potter," Voldemort spat. "Just in time."

"Let them go, Voldemort," Harry said, his eyes flicking from Voldemort to the Death Eaters and then finally to his friends. "This has always been between you and me."

"I think not, Harry," Voldemort replied. "You come alone, boy?"

"I came for my friends," Harry said strongly.

Taking a few steps forward, Harry looked Ginny in the eyes and tried to tell her with his that everything was going to be all right.

"Very well, Harry," Voldemort hissed quietly. "Surrender your wand and they may go."

Harry shook his head. "Don't have a wand," he said simply.

Voldemort blinked and was immediately on his guard. "Lucius," he said cautiously and nodded towards Harry.

Lucius Malfoy pointed his wand at Harry. "*Expelliarmus*," he said. Nothing happened. "*Accio Wand*" Again nothing.

Harry shook his head. They could see that he was not hiding a wand, not anywhere in the burnt and bloodstained tattered white polo shirt that hung loosely to his frame, over the dragon armour chest piece. His jeans were torn and bloody as well, there was no wand.

"You came before me unarmed, Harry?" Voldemort hissed with cruel laughter.

Harry did not move, he didn't give any sign that he had heard Voldemort. Truth be told, he was trying to see if he could find Dementors in the trees. His mind raced on forming a plan to get everyone out of this situation alive. He could think of nothing except distracting Voldemort and the Death Eaters, and that meant duelling them.

I can't fight them all! his mind screamed at him. *I can bloody well try,* he reasoned right back.

Harry took a deep breath and looked deep into the eyes of his enemy. The snake like demon stared back strongly. "Let's end this, Voldemort," he said, his voice held no emotion until he looked down to his friends. "Ron, Hermione, Ginny," he added. "I'm sorry..."

"Harry-" Ginny began but was cut off as Voldemort cast a silencing charm over the three of them.

"Harry Potter," Voldemort hissed. "Let us duel!"

Harry nodded. "Move them out of the way," he motioned to his friends.

"Very well," Voldemort said, and began walking towards Harry. As he went a quick flick of his wand sent Ron, Hermione and Ginny floating roughly across the clearing and coming to rest near the edge of the trees. "Watch them," Voldemort called to his Death Eaters.

Harry began to breathe heavily with nerves. He knew this duel was probably going to hurt. He knew he was going to have to use everything he had learned over the years. He knew he had to provide enough time for Dementors to get his friends out of here.

Voldemort stopped walking when he was about fifteen feet away from Harry and raised his wand ominously. "Bow to Death, Harry," he

whispered and fell into a mock bow himself, although his eyes never left Harry.

Neither moved. The silence in the clearing was absolute as these two stared each other down. Two wizards, both possessed of awesome, almost unmatched power. Voldemort had a more extensive knowledge of curses and dark magic, Harry knew this but he also knew he could be faster if he concentrated.

It was Voldemort who struck first. "*Carnis Sumptum*," he cried, his wand swinging down in an arc of fire that ripped through the air towards Harry.

Harry saw it coming and braced himself. He didn't move until the purple fire was almost upon him. At the last moment he took a step back and raised his hand in front of him, a white orb of magic in his palm. The purple fire hit his raised palm and with a cry Harry pushed it back and both spells exploded in the air. A shower of sparks fell over the clearing, purples and whites that were reflected in Harry's eyes.

Harry was quick to respond after that. "*Aduro!*" he said, bitterly hot flames jumping from his own hand and roaring over the clearing to Voldemort.

A brief second later and Voldemort deflected them with a dark spell. Harry side-stepped to the left and avoided contact with the rebounded spell. Voldemort did not waste time. "*Congelo!*" the Dark Lord fired a freezing curse.

Harry ducked and felt the cold of the spell rush over his head; ruffling his hair and making him shiver. He noticed the Death Eaters watching the duel silently, and his friends with regret etched on their faces. There was no sign of Derrmas.

"*Vestic!*" Harry stood and shot. The purple light of death rocketed through the air, making a deep throbbing sound as it connected with Voldemort's shield, a shield Harry had not even seen him raise.

Voldemort smiled. "You know, Harry," he said, as both hero and villain walked separate ways around the clearing. They kept the distance between them equal, but neither was going to lose a shot at the other.

"You are the only one who has ever fired a curse designed to kill at me."

"It's a pity I missed," Harry replied, bringing his own shield into existence in a haze of blue light.

"Indeed," Voldemort sneered, his eyes blazing with hate and fury.
"Crucio!"

Harry took a deep breath and dodged the curse expertly, his shield taking the brunt of it. "*Incendio!*" he returned his own curse, a hot wave of fire flowing like a river through the air towards Voldemort.

It missed as Voldemort moved with lightning fast agility, his wand already pointed back at Harry before the curse had fully passed.
"*Abrumpo Caput!*"

Harry, not knowing this curse, did not attempt to block it. Instead he fell hard to the ground, the blood red light skimming over his cheek as he pressed into the ground. Voldemort fired another curse quickly and Harry only just got to his feet as the ground exploded in dirt and icy grass around him, small rocks cutting his skin as they were propelled into the air.

"*Expelliarmus!*" he cried hopefully, but the spell was reflected off of Voldemort's shield.

Harry sighed and wiped the sweat from his brow, his eyes flicked from Voldemort to Ginny and he wondered where the hell Derms was. It was then that he saw him. He was crouched behind a tree roughly four feet away from the back of Hermione, unnoticed by the Death Eaters engrossed in the duel. Harry hoped he had a plan.

"*REDUCTO!*" Harry bellowed not at Voldemort but at the ground around him. A dust cloud erupted where the curse hit and dirt was thrown high into the air. It hid him from Voldemort for only a few seconds but Harry used those seconds well. He ran towards Voldemort, palms raised in defence, a curse already forming on his lips.

"*Cusindeo!*" he fired twice, once from both hands. Two equal streams of bone breaking light pelted towards the Dark Lord, who threw himself out of the way.

The Death Eaters angrily moved forward as Harry advanced but Voldemort waved them back. "I am impressed, Harry," Voldemort conceded halting Harry. "You have grown much since we last fought in Hogsmeade."

"You killed hundreds," Harry spat angrily. "At Beauxbatons, today in Hogsmeade. I've grown to kill you!"

Voldemort's face split into that patronising snake-like grin. "Harry," he said, his wand pointed directly at his heart. "Your power is nothing against mine. *You* will die today."

Harry frowned and his hate for Voldemort was evident in his eyes. "I'm not afraid to die," he said truthfully. "You're the one who fears death."

Voldemort scowled, bringing his wand down in a sweeping arc. "*AVADA KEDAVRA!*" he cried.

Harry's eyes widened. The curse had been fast. His instincts taking over, he threw himself as far as he could to the left, hitting the ground, knocking his breath out of him. He felt the cool curse of death pass only inches above his head. This provided Voldemort with the opportunity for which he had been waiting.

With a flick of his wand he brought Harry to his feet and bound his body in mid air. Harry was stuck half a foot off of the ground, unable to move anything but his head. His arms were strapped tightly to his sides and his hands were balled into fists. He could not do wandless magic. He had been caught.

"You are beaten, Harry," Voldemort gloated. "What now, hero?"

Harry stared into the eyes of his mortal enemy and despite his predicament he smiled. "Nothing, Tom," he said simply. "Nothing...." Harry then looked past Voldemort and over to the Death Eaters.

Voldemort followed his gaze and it took him a moment to realise what Harry was looking at. *He was looking at nothing.* "FOOLS!" Voldemort cried in anger. "You have let them escape."

The Death Eaters turned in horror to the spot on the ground where Ron,

Hermione and Ginny had sat only moments before. It was indeed empty. How or where they had gotten to was anybody's guess. Dementors had succeeded. Harry could work unencumbered by concern for their safety.

Harry, still suspended in the air, laughed. Voldemort turned back to him angrily. "*DIFFINDO*," the Dark Lord cried mercilessly.

Harry stopped laughing and gritted his teeth as a deep six inch long gash appeared on the inside of his right forearm. It began to bleed heavily but Harry did not care. He had saved his friends lives, and now could work to save his own.

"You did not come alone, Potter?" Voldemort spat.

Harry did not give anything away. His arm bled heavily but he could not move it or cast a charm to heal it in his current state. "My friends are very resilient, Tom," Harry said emotionlessly.

"They will die sooner or later," Voldemort hissed, waving his hand dismissively. Harry noticed that Voldemort did not approach him, even in his helpless state. The masked Death Eaters observed silently. He saw Draco Malfoy watching the scene with a sneer on his face.

"You'll never touch them," Harry replied forcefully.

Voldemort laughed and this was the cue for the Death Eaters to do the same. "Harry," Voldemort mused, shaking his head and taking a few steps closer to him. "You duelled me and through your courage and resilience you have spared the lives of your friends. Once again," he sneered, "you are, to the people of this world, a hero."

Harry saw the glint in Voldemort's eye and the murderous smile as he clenched his wand tightly. "But your victory will not last. For you are about to discover what happens to heroes." A truly hideous smile spread across the face of the demon. "You are about to die, Harry, but not before you witness the destruction of Hogwarts castle."

Harry blinked and frowned. "You'll never get past the wards," he said without any hesitation.

"Perhaps not. But I do not intend to..." Voldemort replied cryptically, and

moved closer to Harry as the Death Eaters formed a tight circle around them.

Voldemort was standing face to face with Harry who still hung suspended half a foot off the ground. Slowly, Voldemort reached out and traced his finger down Harry's lightning bolt shaped scar.

Harry cried out in true pain and thrashed his head around wildly, as it died down to a harsh burning. Voldemort and the Death Eaters were laughing as Harry regained his senses.

"Alas, Harry," Voldemort said. "We must proceed with today's events. I fear the escape of your friends may bring some unwanted company all too soon."

Harry trembled and breathed heavily as blood from his scar streamed down into his right eye. "What are you going to do?" he asked breathlessly.

Voldemort seemed to hesitate for a moment but in the end he spoke. "Did you ever wonder how I destroyed the wards around your Muggle home last September?" he asked.

Harry, remembering how Voldemort had killed his last family members, snarled "How did you do it?"

Voldemort waved his hand dismissively. "Ancient magic, Harry, ancient magic. In fact there is no older magic than that which I now possess."

Harry did not say anything but a cold feeling had begun to develop in the pit of his stomach. He felt the anticipation in the clearing, in the very air. Something very bad was going to happen. "What are you talking about?" Harry finally spoke.

"Patience, Harry," Voldemort smiled. "Patience...."

Five Minutes Earlier

Dermas moved silently through the undergrowth in the forest, trying not to step on anything that could give him away. He moved as quickly as he

dared, as he could hear Harry duelling for his life just beyond the next tree.

Trask shook his head and smiled as he rounded a tree and saw the bound forms of Ron, Hermione and Ginny only four feet away. Harry had tricked Voldemort into moving them here, and he would lose them for that. Stealthily, Dermal approached Hermione from behind. He had seen Voldemort silence them so he did not have to worry about them making any noise. He tapped Hermione on the shoulder.

Hermione turned so fast Dermal had to duck as she swung her arms at him. It only took her a moment to recognise him as a friend. Trask raised a finger to his lips, telling her to make as little noise as possible. The nearest Death Eater stood just three feet in front of Ron, but was totally engrossed in the duel between Voldemort and Harry.

"Deliquesco!" Trask whispered, his wand resting on the shackles around Hermione's ankles. The bindings vanished and he quickly did the same for her wrists.

Now that she was free, Hermione tapped Ginny on her shoulder in front of her and drew her attention away from the fight. As Ginny turned so did Ron, and five seconds later they were both free of their manacles.

"Into the trees," Dermal whispered, his voice only just reaching the three of them. "Into the trees, now."

The four of them quietly backed away from the clearing, the Death Eaters, Voldemort and Harry none the wiser. It was not until they were far back under the dark canopy of trees that they spoke.

"We can't leave, Harry," Ginny said strongly, rubbing the burnt and bruised flesh around her wrists. Those chains had tightened immensely, and had cut into her skin. Ron and Hermione shared equal wounds.

"Harry can look after himself," Dermal replied. He did not know these three teenagers well, but he knew their importance to Harry. "You'll just be a distraction, and that is not what he needs right now."

Ron and Hermione seemed to be of different minds. Ron insisted in going to Harry's aide, but Hermione wanted reinforcements. "We have to

get Dumbledore and the Order," she said. "Why didn't they come with you?" she asked.

Trask shook his head and looked back through the darkness of the trees to where he knew Harry was. "Dumbledore and most of the Order are fighting for Hogwarts at its very gates," Dermas replied truthfully. "Harry knew you had been taken, but he was waiting for Voldemort to make contact. We had no idea where you were."

"How did you find us?" asked Ron.

Dermas turned to face him. "Harry found you actually. He somehow knew where to find you in the forest."

"That's why we can't leave him," Ginny repeated strenuously. "He can't die..."

"Thinks about what you're saying," Trask replied, picking up a stone from the icy ground. "You have no wands. You'll just get in Harry's way."

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked nervously.

"*Portus!*" Trask whispered, turning the stone in his hands into a Portkey, destination Hogwarts. "I mean," he added, turning to Hermione. "That Harry has his job to do, and we have ours. Hold this!"

Ron and Hermione both put a hand on the offered stone but Ginny hesitated. "He is going to try and kill You-Know-Who, isn't he?"

Trask sighed and put the Portkey in Hermione's hands. "Grab the key, Ginny," he said. "We can't help Harry now...."

"No!" Ginny said quickly, turning back the way they had come and breaking into a run.

"Damn it," Trask whispered under his breath, turning back just in time to see Ron and Hermione break into their own runs. "No," he breathed, pointing his wand at the Portkey still clenched in Hermione's hand. "*Activate!*" he cried, and two seconds later both Ron and Hermione had shimmered away, linked once again by their hands.

Not wasting another second and wanting to get to her before she did

something foolish, Trask turned and ran after Ginny, stumbling through the darkness of the forest. He found her standing just under the protective shadow of a tree near the edge of the clearing. He came up next to her silently and looked out into the clearing at Voldemort and Harry.

Harry was suspended in the air and the Death Eaters had formed a circle around both him and Voldemort. Trask could only see the back of the Dark Lord but he saw the anger and hate on Harry's face. This was going to get really nasty Trask thought nervously. Harry was in real trouble.

"We have to help him," whispered Ginny. "We can't leave him like this."

Trask only nodded.

"Ready to meet death, Harry?" Voldemort questioned, his eyes alight with excitement.

"More than ready," Harry replied stoically.

Voldemort laughed and turned to his Death Eaters. He spoke with his back turned to Harry. "Do you know what day it is, Harry?" he asked. "What the significance of March the 20th is?"

Harry frowned and winced as his jaw began to ache again. It meant the quick heal spell was dissipating. He looked quickly around the clearing, searching for a way out. He didn't see one. "March 20th? No?"

Voldemort turned back around to face him and for a moment Harry saw a face that truly terrified him. It was the face of someone who was sure they had won, someone who was about to. "Today is the Vernal Equinox, Harry. Exactly twelve hours of sunlight and moonlight respectively. Great magic can be performed on such days and only such days."

"What's your point?" Harry asked, anger and hate in his voice, though it didn't match that in Voldemort's eyes.

"Blood magic has always been the deepest in our world. Blood binds us,

Harry, and blood can destroy Hogwarts castle."

And it was then that it happened. Harry was powerless to prevent it, powerless to stop it. Voldemort raised his wand and pointed it directly towards the sky. Harry knew he had to be stopped but there was nothing he could do. He watched words begin to form on Voldemort's lips and he knew this was not going to be good.

The world was silent as Harry and the Death Eaters alike, waited for whatever end was coming. When Voldemort spoke the strength in his words was so much that the air vibrated and they resounded off of every tree, every rock for miles around.

"TEMPUS AC CAPACITAS!"

What happened next, Harry would remember for the rest of his life. All was completely an utterly silent for a long moment, and then a great and powerful roar erupted from the end of Voldemort's wand, with a blinding white light.

The light shot high into the heavens and reached the very clouds, lighting the area for miles around. Wave upon wave of power emanated from the light and the Death Eaters struggled to remain standing. Loose rocks and dirt from around the clearing were blown forcefully away.

Forcing himself to look, Harry saw that Voldemort remained unaffected by the gusting winds and the amazing light. There was a clap like thunder and several bright blue flashes lit the sky like lightning, but there were no storm clouds.

Harry felt the warmth flee the clearing, replaced with bitter cold. The beam of swirling white light from Voldemort's wand turned a blood red and Harry saw the Dark Lord place his free hand on the point of his wand. Harry realised Voldemort was adding his own blood to the spell. *Blood magic* Harry thought. *This was Voldemort's blood magic!*

An unearthly scream assaulted Harry's ears and the ground shook beneath him. Leaves, rocks, debris and ice were thrown around him and his eyes widened as the red beam began to gather itself above the tip of Voldemort's wand, like a giant red sphere hanging in the air. It swirled

and bubbled, the deep roar emanating from within.

Harry saw that the Death Eaters had all retreated behind him and, apart from Voldemort who was unaffected by the spell, Harry was closest to the growing red sphere of blood magic. "VOLDEMORT!" he shouted over the roars and screams as the magic seethed in the air. "WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?"

Harry's shouts died on the wind as all at once the magical screams ceased, and all grew quiet once again. The spinning ball of red magic hanging in the air had almost slowed to a stop and Harry found himself desperately hoping that whatever it was hadn't worked. Though deep down he knew he wasn't that lucky.

His eyes remained fixed on the pulsating globe of magic suspended in the air. He could feel the power emanating from it. It was the only source of heat in the area. The wind and all else seemed to have died. It took Harry a moment to realise that Voldemort was staring at him, and when he did he felt himself fall from the sky and land hard on the freezing ground.

"It is done, Harry Potter," Voldemort said way too calmly. "Hogwarts will fall, and with it, the world. You have failed all who placed hope in you, all who called you, *saviour*."

Harry gasped for breath and struggled to stand. He saw Voldemort standing barely six feet away, a red shadow cast upon him from the growing magic above his head. "What is it?" he cried.

"Death, Harry," hissed the Dark Lord. "It is the end of this world, and the beginning of mine."

Harry's anger was so intense that it blinded him to all else and all he saw were two red eyes staring back at him, mocking him and his efforts. Voldemort's snake-like voice filled his mind and Harry found his body tingling with raw, pure magic.

"*Sacrifice*, Harry," Voldemort hissed, his voice full of malice. "The blood magic demands sacrifice!"

Those watching Harry were taken back at the look of pure hatred on his

face. He looked so different from the Harry everyone was used to. His mind was set and with a roar that no one expected, Harry rose from the floor in the blink of an eye and rushed at Voldemort, his left arm coming up fast.

Harry ran, and as he did he raised his left arm high above his head and called for the sword he knew resided just out of sight. It appeared in his raised hand as a spike of pure silver and the glowing sphere of red light was reflected in the long blade of the sword of Godric Gryffindor.

Harry covered the distance to Voldemort in less than two seconds and with another cry he plunged the sword down towards the Dark Lord's face, aiming to kill as the world was silent and magic frothed overhead. For his part, Voldemort did not even move as the blade fell towards him, did not even flinch. It became apparent why a moment later as the blade was caught in an invisible force just short of Voldemort's face, and Harry almost fell back from the protective wall surrounding his enemy.

Harry's eyes widened in momentary surprise and it was that that almost cost him everything. Moving with an unbelievable speed, Voldemort pulled Harry's sword from the air and turned it around in his own skeletal hands. Harry gasped.

Mercilessly, Voldemort thrust the sword downward into Harry's chest. Harry was wearing the strongest dragon armour money could buy. It could stop a variety of curses and prevent most blades from piercing him... but not this blade. The magic in the sword of Godric Gryffindor was over one thousand years old and as such was much stronger than dragon hide. The blade shredded the armour and pierced Harry's flesh.

Harry cried out in pain. Voldemort had taken his own blade and pierced him high in his right shoulder, just below the collarbone. He was blinded by the pain and it was at this moment that Ginny ran out from her hiding place in the trees, Derris following quickly behind her.

They both saw that the blade protruded a good nine inches down out of Harry's back. The length of silver slick with dripping blood. His right arm now hung useless by his side as he fell to his knees at Voldemort's feet. Ginny gasped and covered her mouth in horror as Voldemort ruthlessly twisted the blade in his flesh. Harry cried out desperately and his voice

broke into a hoarse whisper as his face was twisted in a grimace of unbelievable pain. Blood gushed from the wound and down his chest, arm, back and dragon armour.

"The bitter end, Harry..." Voldemort whispered and all in the clearing held their breath as Harry clenched his teeth and tried to speak.

When he did, his voice was even, cold and surprisingly steady for a man who had a sword stuck through his chest. "I am going to kill you!" was all he said.

Voldemort laughed.... he merely laughed. He was still holding the ruby-encrusted handle of Gryffindor's sword as he twisted it into the prostrate Harry before him. After a short moment Voldemort smiled. "Not in this life, Harry. Farewell!"

Then as Dermas pulled Ginny back as she rushed forward towards Harry, and the Death Eaters began closing in again, Voldemort pulled the blade upwards and through Harry's flesh below his collarbone, driving it up and cutting through the bone and armour before it came out just to the right of his neck.

Harry screamed and the instant he was no longer impaled on the sword he fell backwards and everything grew black. He saw spots on his vision as unconsciousness threatened to claim him. He could vaguely see the glowing sphere of magic but his mind had trouble comprehending what he was actually seeing as the relentless numbing pain in his torn shoulder took hold. Blood gushed from the wound and Harry paled.

With the world darkening around him, and a feeling in his chest colder than a Dementor could ever be, Harry felt, achingly, that he had lived a very, very long time. *Too long....* He felt detached to what was happening in the world around him. Voldemort's words came back to haunt him as the cold feeling increased, like an icy grip on his heart.

This is what happens to heroes....

Harry coughed and rolled over, still feeling the blood rushing from his pierced shoulder. *It wasn't right* he thought in some corner of his mind that was still coherent. *He can't win, that shouldn't happen.*

He had come too far to lose now. He had seen too many good people die and it would all be for naught if he joined them now. Though Harry knew he was dying. The amount of blood he was losing from his mortal wound was enough for him to realise that.

In the farthest consciousness of his mind, a part that still belonged to the real world, the waking world, Harry heard a familiar voice calling out his name and he also heard the voice of the demon.

Ginny watched Harry fall to the ground in a bloody arc that he did not get back up from. Her heart screamed out to him as Dermal Trask held her back from rushing to his side. All the while her mind shouted at her that this is not happening.

This can't be happening, she thought as she panted heavily. *Harry... he can't be dying.*

He's Harry, Harry wins. Harry destroys basilisks and dispels hundreds of Dementors. He

faces down impossible foes that would have left anyone else shaking in terror and he beats them! Ginny felt herself fall to her knees but she could not care. *He doesn't end like this...*

Dermal watched Harry fall off of the sword in a numb terror. For all he had taught Harry of the blade it had not been enough, and now he was either dying or dead on the ground at Voldemort's feet. *And the hope of the world was dying with him* Trask realised devastatingly.

"NO!" he cried. "HARRY!"

This was not a smart thing to do. Voldemort turned on his heel and smiled when his cold gaze fell upon Dermal and Ginny. Throwing Harry's sword aside carelessly, Voldemort advanced. Dermal noticed he and the Death Eaters begin to move towards them and he tried to pull Ginny up to escape. But she seemed too shocked to do anything as she beheld Harry's fallen and broken form.

So Dermal did the next best thing he could think of. He moved in front of

Ginny and raised his wand at Voldemort. He shook slightly as the Dark Lord approached but he was determined to show no fear. His eyes moved from Voldemort, to the dozen Death Eaters, to Harry and then finally up to the sphere of magic in the sky before resting on Voldemort again.

Voldemort stopped advancing eight feet away from Trask and the Death Eaters kept their distance on the far side of the clearing, they were closer to Harry than anything else. "Who are you?" Voldemort asked him as Ginny managed to stand behind him, fury and hard tears evident in her eyes.

"My name is Dermas Trask," he answered Voldemort. Anything to stall for time while he worked out what the hell he was going to do.

"And why are you here?" Voldemort really wanted to know. He could not understand why they had come back.

Dermas opened his mouth to speak but Ginny pushed past him and now stood before him. "We came for Harry," Ginny cried, tears streaming down her face as Voldemort's gaze fell upon her.

"Harry is dead, my dear," Voldemort hissed wickedly.

"No..." Ginny breathed. "We love him. He will live."

Voldemort frowned and became deathly silent before, after a long moment where nothing but the red magic suspended in the air moved, he spoke. "Love..." he scoffed. "Why? Love is a weakness. Love has cost Mr. Potter his life."

Ginny shook her head. "GET UP, HARRY!" she called hopefully, desperately and tearfully. "Don't die...."

"He can't hear you," Voldemort smiled. "He has passed into another world."

"HE HASN'T," she screamed, showing no fear of Lord Voldemort. All that mattered to her now was that Harry got up. All that mattered was that Harry lived.

Voldemort's red eyes blazed in anger and he took a few steps forward and with a wave of his wand, Ginny was forced to her knees and Derris was thrown back against a tree. He hit his head hard and was unconscious instantly.

"Tell me, child," Voldemort growled, raising his voice. "Are you willing to die for your love?" As he said this he brought his wand between her eyes, his threat all too real.

Ginny stared at the tip of the wand in front of her. It was this wand that had caused hundreds, if not thousands of deaths throughout the world. It was this wand that might claim her own life depending on her answer to Voldemort's question. *Would I die for Harry's love?* She questioned of herself.

Looking up into Voldemort's face Ginny gave her answer. "I would die for him," she managed, giving one final look at Harry's bloodied and battered form lying twenty feet away. "As Harry would for the world, I would for Harry...."

Voldemort shook his head. "Very well," he hissed. "You will join your saviour. You will die for your love. AVADA..."

In the farthest consciousness of his mind, a part that still belonged to the real world, the waking world, Harry heard a familiar voice calling out his name, and he also heard the voice of the demon.

"I would die for him... As Harry would for the world, I would for Harry...."

Harry blinked and for a moment he saw the glowing sphere of magic hovering above him in the sky. It faded again but he had recognised that voice. That was Ginny, his Ginny. Ginny whom he had loved and had her love returned. Love that was built on the foundation of five years of friendship. He felt the icy grip of death fall from his heart and the warm, unmistakable feeling of love take its place.

"Very well. You will join your saviour. You will die for your love. AVADA..."

What happened next happened so fast that no one saw it happen until it was over. Harry felt more than heard that Voldemort was about to kill Ginny, and it was this that brought him back out of the very clutches of death. He felt the icy grip of death fall from his heart and a fabulous, warm, unmistakable feeling of love take its place.

His pure magic exploded inside of him like fireworks in a sparkling night sky and he felt it seeping into every part of his body. The pain in his shoulder was forgotten and the blood had stopped flowing. He was lying in a pool of it, but for now it had stopped flowing. And then, as the magic was finally released and he had a full and complete understanding of it, Harry knew without a doubt what he had to do. A thousand images of Ginny from the past year flew through his mind and Harry remembered in particular the prediction Firenze had made that the woman he loved would die.

God willing, he was about to change that!

To all watchful eyes Harry appeared dead on the ground that was soaked red with his blood. But inside he had never been more alive. And as Voldemort began the final word of the Killing curse, Harry disappeared from his place on the ground, and reappeared twenty feet away.

Ginny stared at the glowing green tip of Voldemort's wand a few feet away. She knew he was about to kill her and she also knew that she could not stop it. Voldemort had killed Harry and now she was going to join him. She heard the first word of the most unforgivable of curses and braced herself against the end.

She looked stoically up at Voldemort, she was not going to go out screaming. She would not give the creature in front of her that pleasure. Nothing could stop it now death was coming for her. It was at that moment that he appeared.

Instantly and completely unexpectedly, Harry appeared on the ground before her, standing with his back to Voldemort who was half way through the final word of the curse of death, such was the speed in which the mind worked. . In the infinitesimal millisecond left Ginny's mind assessed Harry in front of her.

He was smiling down at her reassuringly, but he looked different. The closest she could come to describing it was that he seemed to be glowing. Not glowing exactly, but pure white magic was streaming on his skin and through his eyes and hair. It ran across the grievous wound in his shoulder and shone on his teeth. His hair and clothes were moving though there was no wind, and the green in his eyes was brought to life so amazingly by the pure magic that they sparkled as if they were on fire.

It was then that time caught up with them. Harry turned faster than Ginny could see and was facing Voldemort as the Killing Curse was finally spoken.

Briefly Ginny saw the surprise in Voldemort's eyes just as the curse was released. "...*KEDAVRA!*"

The green light of death shot forth from Voldemort's wand as it had done so many times before. Ginny's eyes widened as she released that Harry was going to take the curse full-blown in the chest. "NO-" she cried but it was too late.

Harry stood before her and took the green light in the chest and face. He was not thrown backwards, but he slowly fell back and his head landed softly in Ginny's lap where she sat on the ground. Neither Ginny nor Voldemort moved as the green light passed and Harry's eyes stared up into the sky.

A bright white light shot out of his chest and snapped up into the air, crackling with raw power. A modicum of Harry's pure magic survived. The magic sparkled in the air and left its master's body. It had been a protective shield stronger than anything that had gone before it. It had protected Harry against even the evil that was the Avada Kedavra.

The raw pure magic hung in the air for a moment in between the fallen form of Harry and the standing shocked form of Lord Voldemort. And then suddenly it cracked forward like a whip and smacked into Voldemort's chest.

The Dark Lord shrieked with an unholy scream and he fell to the cold ground. Writhing in pain he screamed and thrashed as the pure magic assaulted him, piercing him. It cut into his blood and seeped into his

body, forcing its way in.

Voldemort rolled and blood fell from his eyes as the pure magic did whatever it was it was doing. The Death Eaters had begun moving to help their Master but they could do nothing now. Voldemort had only ever felt this much pain once. It had been when his own Killing curse had ripped him from his body that fateful Halloween night so many years ago. This was different though. He could feel this white magic becoming a part of him as he fought for control over the pain.

He was breathing heavily and shrieking when he felt something in his mind. Voldemort's screams turned into a snarl as he recognised Potter in his mind. The boy was still alive, and the connection between them was stronger now than ever before. Voldemort knew that if he spoke Potter could hear him, so he did.

"This is far from over, Potter," Voldemort spoke with his mind. Only Harry heard him.

Voldemort heard nothing in response but he could feel the light in his mind that was Harry and he knew that he had been heard. It was then that Harry's voice filled his own head.

"You stay away," Harry whispered, his voice bouncing and resounding in every corner of Voldemort's mind. "Stay away from those I love."

And that was all that was spoken. Voldemort screamed a final time as the white magic finally permeated his body and weakened him beyond all belief. Warily and angrily, he reached into his pocket and grasped a Portkey hidden within the folds of his dark robes. "Activate," he hissed, and Ginny and the Death Eaters watched as he shimmered away to nothing.

The sphere of red blood magic still hung ominously in the air and the Death Eaters looked from that, to Ginny and Harry and finally to where their Master had been only moments before. Then all at once they grasped at their left forearms as their Marks burned viciously. They were being summoned to Voldemort's aid.

As one, with Draco Malfoy guided by his father, the Death Eaters

Disapparated from the clearing. All that were left now were Ginny, Harry in her lap and Dermal with his head bleeding against a tree.

Ginny watched the Death Eaters as they Disapparated and breathed a heavy sigh of relief. It was then that she looked down to what she thought was the lifeless form of Harry in her lap and the tears fell anew from her eyes.

She cradled his head in her hands and brought it up to her chest, holding him for dear life and sanity. She looked down into his face and saw his eyelids heavily closed and his right one crusted over with blood from his scar. Her eyes travelled down to his arm and she saw a deep gash on his forearm before she gazed at the wound in his shoulder. She gasped at the amount of blood on his tattered shirt and jeans and ruined dragon armour.

The cut in his shoulder had clogged with congealed blood but it was still horrendous to look at. She cried out loud and gazed up at the red ball of light, noticing that it had started to spin but she did not care now. Harry had died for her; he had taken the Killing curse and-

"Ginny..." croaked a sore and utterly defeated voice from within her arms.

Ginny gasped and almost dropped Harry out of her lap as he spoke. She looked down into his face and saw that he had opened his left eye and was staring at her. She was amazed that after all he had just been through that he was alive, and was even more amazed that he had managed to keep his glasses intact.

"Harry..." she replied just as hoarse, disbelief in her eyes. No one could have survived what he had just been through. It was impossible.

Harry coughed and spat up some blood as he did. "How'd I do?" he asked, trying to smile.

Ginny smiled and even more tears fell as she now held on to Harry strongly. "You... You're alive," was all she could say.

"Should I not be?" he coughed. He managed a smile this time.

"Oh, Harry," she replied, crying and laughing at the same time. She brushed his hair back out of the blood on his forehead. "You survived the curse again!"

Harry breathed in heavily and winced as he tried to move his useless arm. "I know," he whispered. *But Voldemort got some of my pure magic for it...*

"And Voldemort and the Death Eaters are gone," Ginny continued happily. "You won, Harry. We won...."

Despite it all Harry laughed slightly. He had continued to live; he had beaten Voldemort and death again. "I think we should get back to-" he began but was cut off as a tremendous bang erupted close by.

Ginny was thrown back against the ground and Harry held onto her with his good hand as he turned to see the source of the explosion. What he saw he could not believe.

The red sphere of magic was stretching in the sky and after destroying the perfect silence of only a moment ago, was now roaring with untamed power and growing white around its edges.

Harry watched with wide eyes and a deep pain in his shoulder as the very air, the space in which it moved was torn open and stretched as the now white sphere became a gaping hole in the air that was at least twenty feet tall. It cut into the ground and shot up above the trees of the forest.

"HARRY!" Ginny called. "What's happening?"

Harry did not answer her. He recognised what now writhed and spun before him. It was a creation out of his nightmares, something Firenze had told him to avoid. He had been dreaming about it for months. It was the fiery circle of light, and death surrounded it.

"No...." he breathed. This was not fair. He had been through enough, this wasn't fair. He did not know what it was going to do, but he knew it was not going to be good. What Voldemort had told him about it was enough of a claim to that.

Slowly stones and loose debris were pulled toward the spinning circle. Small bolts of magic shot off the disc's edges and rent the ground. Harry could not take his eyes off it as he stared into the gaping black maw that was a hole in the fabric of space.

"Help me up, Ginny," he gasped. "Before it's too late."

Ginny nodded and looked from the circle to Harry before grasping him under his uninjured left arm; she pulled him unsteadily to his feet. Harry leaned on her for support as he was absolutely shattered from his fight. He had lost a lot of blood and had had some of his pure magic ripped out of him by the Avada Kedavra curse. He was not in a good state.

And there they stood.

Two lonely figures that had been saved by love only minutes ago, staring at the destruction that now unfolded before them. It did not seem right now, it did not seem fair. To have survived so much only to be cheated at the very end. Harry was annoyed more than scared, and he was going to do anything to stop it.

"Bastard..." he said under his breath. "This is not good, Ginny."

"What is it?" she asked.

Harry stared into the image from his nightmares. In his dreams it had not been this big, but there was no mistaking it as the circle of light in front of him sucked in everything, including the air. Loose leaves and wood were now being dragged across the forest floor or floating on the wind into the black hole that stood open like a doorway in the middle of the clearing.

Harry realized it had gotten bigger than it was only a moment ago and words that Voldemort had said earlier on came back to haunt him.

"You are about to die, Harry, but not before you witness the destruction of Hogwarts castle."

"Blood magic has always been the deepest in our world. Blood binds us, Harry, and blood can destroy Hogwarts castle."

"No..." he managed, his eyes growing heavy and his mind drifting in and

out of consciousness. He held on to Ginny for all he was worth.

Harry thought of the students and professors that lived in the castle and were huddled there now. He looked at the circle in front of him again and saw that it had grown bigger, and that it was getting stronger. He could now feel the pull of it as a large branch flew past him and into the darkness.

"What are we going to do, Harry?" Ginny asked.

Harry let go of her briefly and swayed on his feet for a moment. He then raised his left hand and with a cry pointed it towards the twenty-five foot circle. He shouted, "*VESTIC!*"

He almost fell over and was disappointed to see that he was not strong enough to cast the curse. His magic was drained from the battle fought only moments ago. Harry did not think he could manage a simple summoning charm right now.

He looked at Ginny and saw her hair moving in the wind across her face as it was pulled towards the circle. He saw the fear in her eyes that turned to love when she looked back at him. "How can it be stopped?" she asked nervously, her lip trembling slightly.

Harry sighed. "I don't know," he croaked. "I just don't know."

But slowly a thought was forming in the back of his mind. It was a dark thought, and one that only existed because of something else that Voldemort had said earlier.

"Sacrifice, Harry," Voldemort hissed, his voice full of malice. "The blood magic demands sacrifice!"

His mind raced and Harry saw the only conceivable way to save the school, to save the lives of a thousand innocent people. *To save Ginny's life* he thought, turning to look at her with tears in his eyes.

"I have to go now, Ginny," he said with a frown. He didn't want it to sound as if he was not coming back.

"Harry..." Ginny began nervously.

With a sigh Harry almost lost consciousness as he remembered Voldemort adding his blood to the spell cast half an hour ago. The spell that was now threatening to destroy Hogwarts. If Hogwarts fell, millions would lose hope and many would flock to Voldemort out of fear. Harry tried not to think about that, and concentrated more on the fact that Voldemort had used his own blood to solidify the spell.

Ever since his resurrection back in that godforsaken graveyard, Harry had shared a connection with Voldemort so powerful that it bordered on the two of them sharing one mind. And that connection existed to such an extent because Voldemort had used Harry's blood in his rebirth ceremony.

They shared the same blood.

And with that thought it was all clear to Harry. The circle wanted sacrifice; Voldemort had opened it with his blood. Harry could close it with his, as they were one and the same. It wasn't fair, he had no idea what waited for him when he went through. It may finally be death, but he was going to find out.

"I can stop it, Gin," he whispered, holding her hand with his useable left arm and staring deep into her brown eyes. "But it means saying goodbye."

"Harry," Ginny said. "You better not be thinking what I know you're thinking."

Harry smiled sadly and brushed her hair back behind her ear. "I have to," he said strongly. "But I won't be gone long."

"You can't go through there, Harry," Ginny almost screamed, looking in fear at the growing darkness that was the tear in space in front of her. "You don't know where you'll end up."

"That doesn't matter," he replied, shaking his head as a single tear fell from his eye. "Voldemort has been beaten back for awhile. I intend to be back before he is."

Ginny started to cry and she sniffed, looking at the ground and not at Harry. "I almost lost you a moment ago," she managed. "I don't want to

lose you now."

Harry lifted her chin up until she was looking into his eyes and he back into hers. Then slowly, but gently, he kissed her deeply and wrapped his good arm around her. "I'll come back, Ginny," he whispered in her ear as she wrapped her own arms around him tightly. "I promise..."

Ginny sniffed into his shoulder as she realised fully the complete and utter hopelessness of the situation. "I know you will...." she managed.

Harry held onto her strongly for a few more moments, and then slowly he pulled something off his finger from behind her back. "Here," he managed, looking deep into her brown eyes. "Take this...."

Ginny sniffed and looked down into her hand as Harry placed something warm and metallic in it. "But I gave this to you," she said through the tears.

Harry followed her gaze down to the silver ring now resting on her palm. He closed her fingers around it with his own hand. "Hold on to it for me," he said tearfully. "I'll come back for it."

Ginny breathed a heavy, shaky sigh and offered Harry the smallest of nods.

Harry let her go and her legs gave away beneath her. The ground was shaking from the immense power of the circle and an almighty howl went up from within it as Harry approached. He glanced back to Ginny and saw her crying on the ground. Turning back, he did the hardest thing he had ever had to do....

He had to walk away.

As the wind blew his hair about and he limped the last few steps to the blackness of the circular tear in front of him, an unexpected calm floated over him. Harry knew what he had to do, and he accepted that. All the fights, all the anguish, all the loss and personal pain had led to this one moment, where the fate of a thousand lives and that of the world rested on his actions. A painful destiny had to be realised. He had to sacrifice himself to the unknown, and stop the inevitable.

With a final deep breath, Harry simply fell forward and into the blackness of the blood magic in front of him.

He disappeared and knew no more.

Ginny watched in a numb disbelief as Harry fell into the shaking circle of light. The edges were illuminated the brightest white but Harry had fallen into the darkness. It was over.

With a sound like a zip, the gap in the air simply closed. No bangs, no protests, no howls. The circle had ceased to exist, and nothing was left to show that it had ever been there. Ginny's world grew quiet as she cried in the middle of the clearing, her head in her hands.

Time lost all meaning and she did not know how long she cried for before she felt a warm hand on her shoulder. She looked up quickly and saw the sad face of Dermal Trask staring past her and over to the spot where Harry had existed only moments ago.

"Come on, Ginny," he said quietly, respectfully. "Harry has passed beyond our help now. We have to get back to the castle."

Ginny allowed him to pick her up; she was beyond caring what happened next. She noticed vaguely that Dermal had Harry's sword strapped to his belt next to his own. He must have picked it up before it was dragged into the circle.

Barely two minutes later and Trask had made his final Portkey for that day, and both he and Ginny walked up the castle steps defeated, a raw and numb disbelief clawing at their insides. Ginny had not spoken once since Harry had stepped into the void, and as she reached the top of the castle steps she turned around and looked back at the forest.

There was no way of telling where they had stood and watched Harry save the lives of every person at Hogwarts. The forest was silent, no sign of the apocalyptic and life changing events that had just taken place there. Ginny turned her gaze away from the pain and looked further on past it, towards the mountain in the distance. Black smoke covered the sky over Hogsmeade and Aurors could be seen moving up and down the broken road. Ginny stifled another cry, and then turned into the castle.

Dermas Trask had his injuries looked at briefly by Madam Pomfrey later that night. As he healed in one of the hospital beds for a few minutes, he replayed everything that had happened since he and Ginny had returned to the castle.

They had walked into the Great Hall carelessly, and from the gasps of every person in the room, they knew that they must have looked pretty bad. Dumbledore had been up the front of the school, making a speech when they had entered but now he was rushing down the aisles to meet them.

The Headmaster, who was arguably the strongest wizard in existence, though after seeing Harry survive so much today Trask had his doubts, had paled when Dermas had whispered to him what had occurred and that Harry was gone. They had retired to his office, both Ginny and himself, and had told the story in full from what they both saw and knew.

Dermas smiled sadly as Ginny recounted how Harry had survived the Killing Curse again. There seemed to be nothing that boy could not do. As she spoke Dermas saw her passing a small silver ring from one hand to the other nervously. He had seen that ring on Harry's hand. After she had talked herself hoarse, Dumbledore comforted her before dismissing her. Dermas had seen from the look on her face that she dreaded having to tell Ron and Hermione, but he let her go.

Dumbledore then told Trask all that had happened on his end after he and Harry had gone into the forest. The Aurors had fallen back as far as the gates of the castle and the Death Eaters had pushed in hard for the kill. They would have got it as well but they had all Disapparated, presumably when their Dark Marks had begun to burn.

Hundreds of Death Eater and Aurors littered the streets of Hogsmeade and all the way up to the castle gates in a long trail of death. Dermas had seen the worry behind Dumbledore's eyes whenever he mentioned Harry, and this had concerned him. He could not think of anyone else who could bring Harry back. If Dumbledore could not accomplish it, then no one could.

Although, Trask thought as the Pepper Up potion began to take affect as he left the Hospital wing, we don't know enough about where he has gone, or even what took him there to think about bringing him back...

These dark thoughts took Dernas all the way back to his quarters in the staff wing. And as his tired limbs longed for some rest, Trask stared out of the window and over to the dark mass that was the Forbidden Forest. He sighed and thought of all the death and destruction this day had wrought, and how it all came back to a boy with a lightning bolt shaped scar on his forehead. A mark of great deeds.

Dernas sighed again and lay down achingly on his bed, his limbs protesting the movement. Harry had saved the lives of them all that day, by seemingly sacrificing his own. He had won them a victory over the Dark.

Although Trask personally thought that Harry's victory had come at so high of a price that it was almost indistinguishable from defeat.

Chapter 30 – There Are No Happy Endings

When you fight, you don't fight for abstract values like the flag, or the nation, or democracy. You fight for your buddy. You fight to keep him alive, and he fights to keep you alive, and you go on that way, day after day, battle after battle. And when one of your buddies dies, something inside you dies as well. But you go on. You fight, so that his death isn't meaningless, his sacrifice isn't for nothing.

~~Richard Marcinko

Severus Snape walked with a purpose up through the unnaturally quiet corridors of Hogwarts. It had only been one day since the battle that had changed the world, and still most of the details on what had finally beaten back the Dark Lord were unknown. Unknown to the general public that is.

Snape knew more than most. Dumbledore had confided in him and told him of Potter's sacrifice. How he had survived the Avada Kedavra again and almost destroyed Voldemort with his magic. Fool... Snape thought bitterly.

He passed many students, all too quiet in the halls. Their faces were downcast and utterly defeated as they headed to dinner in the Great Hall. Snape frowned and continued up towards the Headmaster's office. He and Dumbledore had some difficult decisions to make.

Having learned all he could from his usual sources, Snape had a fair idea of the current condition of the Dark Lord. All reports indicated that Potter had almost killed him.

The gargoyle guard was down as he arrived and Snape ascended the stairs silently. As he rose small mutterings and snippets of whispered conversation reached his ears from within Dumbledore's study. Without knocking, he pushed open the double wooden doors and slipped into the room.

As he had suspected, the room was occupied by Dumbledore, Weasley and Minerva. After exchanging curt nods, Snape sat down into one of the offered plush chairs opposite Dumbledore's desk. His gaze instantly fell on the old man behind the desk, who sat hunched from the great weight that rested upon his shoulders.

Over the past year Snape had watched as Dumbledore fell to the ravages of age, and now he sat there hunched and as still as a statue. Deep lines were etched across his bearded face and Snape could easily have mistaken him for a sculpture. He was rigid and the deep grooves in his face were rough and brutal. The only sign that life actually resided in Albus Dumbledore was the two sharp chips of blue in his eyes, that held little warmth and even less of the twinkle that was once their trademark.

Snape was worried, and it was one of those rare occasions where the worry showed on his face. Damn you, Potter... he thought.

"I trust you have word, Severus?" McGonagall said with a strain offering the potions master the slightest of nods.

Snape was silent for a moment as he looked from Minerva to Arthur and then finally back to Dumbledore. "The Dark Lord is weakened," he whispered after a moment, pulling his black robes around him as he spoke. "Potter nearly succeeded in ripping him from his body once again..."

"Anything else?" asked Arthur, almost desperately.

Snape nodded. "He has almost died," he replied. "I doubt he will be able to even move under his own power for a month. Pure magic is coursing through his veins though. When he returns, and, be assured, he will return," Snape spat, turning to each of his colleagues in turn. "The power he will possess will be extraordinary... destructive."

Arthur Weasley shuddered. "How long do we have to find Harry then?" he asked of the small group.

Dumbledore sighed and brought a small cup of tea to his lips, other than that he did nothing. "Has the Ministry begun the search?" asked McGonagall.

Arthur shook his head. "The destruction of Hogsmeade displaced hundreds of people. Hundreds more need to be buried," he said quietly. "We have neither the resources nor the man power to mount a search at this point."

"Surely you can spare one man!" There was a moment of silence, brought about by Snape's uncharacteristic concern for Harry.

"From what your daughter told us, Arthur," McGonagall said. "Harry was near death after battling You-Know-Who. Right now he could be dying alone...."

"Harry is strong-" Arthur began but was cut off.

Dumbledore, who had until this point remained silent, spoke. "Harry is strong," he managed. "But his choices have now led him beyond our help...."

"We can try and find him," Arthur persisted.

"You can indeed try," Dumbledore replied. "But I doubt you will find him anywhere upon this earth."

"What are you saying, Albus?" Snape asked.

Dumbledore's eyes pierced into him for a long moment and all Snape saw was sadness and defeat reflected in them. "Harry has...." he began but then seemed to be at a loss for words. "He..." he tried again.

"We will begin tomorrow," Mr. Weasley assured him with a tired strain to his voice. "Other projects can wait for now...."

McGonagall watched Dumbledore with a growing concern but did not say anything. With a glance at her pocket watch she saw that dinner had just begun. It would be best if the students were informed of the current situation. "I must see to the students," she said quietly and then excused herself.

No one tried to stop her leave and a cold silence fell upon the room. "Well Molly will want me home as well...." Arthur said. "Dumbledore," he nodded to the Headmaster. "Severus..."

With a final worried glance at Dumbledore, Arthur strode over to the fireplace and grasped a handful of powder. "The Burrow," he called and then disappeared in green flames.

Snape and Dumbledore lapsed into silence as their colleagues and friends departed. It was a comfortable silence they now shared, as they had done many times before, but the recent events still hung over both of them bitterly. It was like a splinter in their minds that was too painful to remove or forget. For Dumbledore it was Harry's sacrifice. For Snape it was the countless dead.

"Tea, Severus?" asked Dumbledore sadly once the silence had stretched on beyond comfort.

"No thank you, Headmaster," Snape replied. "I feel the need for something stronger than tea."

Dumbledore nodded and with a wave of his hand, summoned a bottle of brandy from his cabinet across the room. He poured Snape and himself

one and sat back tiredly. "Why do you think he did it, Severus?" Dumbledore asked after a moment, swirling the liquid in his glass.

Snape took a slow sip of his brandy and considered his response. "I tested the area in which the blood magic was cast," he began. "Where Potter and the Dark Lord duelled, it was stronger than any magic I've ever come across. Whatever spell he cast, the Dark Lord planned to destroy this castle. Potter stopped it the only way he knew how."

Dumbledore shook his head. "I was aware of that, Severus," he managed. "What I was really asking was why Harry felt the need to do it. What was going through his young mind as he realised Hogwarts would fall? Did he hesitate? What values and morals were ingrained into him, and when; for him to be able to willingly sacrifice himself to the unknown? I want the answer to these questions, because nobility like that has rarely been seen in this world."

Severus Snape took another agonising sip of his brandy and in so doing drained the glass. I don't know why Potter did it... he thought. To look so much like his arrogant father and at the same time, be nothing like him. He had learned the hard way about the horrors of this life, namely by defeating them, but why would he sacrifice himself?

"Perhaps these answers elude you, Albus," Snape began, in what was a gentle tone for him. "Because you are blinded by a love for Potter. Look at it from an unbiased angle and many possibilities arise."

"Are you in a position to see these possibilities?" Dumbledore asked, raising an eyebrow.

Snape fell silent and put his glass onto the desk in front of him. "I am," he answered eventually. "Potter sacrificed himself because he knows no other way. For use of a better phrase; he doesn't know when to quit."

"That is where you are wrong," Dumbledore said dryly. "It is not that he doesn't know when to quit. It is that he doesn't know how to quit. A subtle, but remarkable difference none the less."

Snape sneered as Dumbledore refilled his glass with warm brandy. "For all his power, he is no longer with us," he stated. "Potter was given a gift

that could, and has, changed the world. But these morals you speak of, Albus, these morals Potter has, may have just cost us the war. He turned his back on his fate and destiny when he stepped into the abyss."

"Severus, I don't-" Dumbledore began but Snape was not finished.

"As much as it pains me to admit it, we needed Potter to win this war," Snape continued. "His power could have one day been unmatched by all who have gone before him. Even the Founders, even Merlin," he said sincerely and quickly. "But the Dark Lord used his only weakness against him. It nearly cost Voldemort his life, but he did. Potter is gone and his power and our hope went with him!"

Dumbledore surveyed Snape for a moment as all the portraits around the room held their breath as the two of them argued. "What weakness do you speak of?" the headmaster asked eventually.

Snape sighed and drank again from his recently refilled glass. "He cared too much, Albus," the bitter potions master began with a strain. "He cared about what happened to this school, its students, and its professors. He cared too much about this entire world and this weakness, this obligation he felt he owed everyone. His morals, headmaster, are what has killed him. His bravery, his courage, his damn Gryffindor qualities are what have finally led him to the grave."

Dumbledore pondered these words. His mind travelled over a thousand minor details in Harry's life that had turned him into the extraordinary and powerful person he was today. Nothing he saw leapt out of him as a weakness. Harry rose above weakness.

"You are wrong, Severus," Dumbledore said simply. "His passion to care, his passion to love, is what kept him alive since he first survived the Curse all those years ago. This passion continues to do so. I do not believe Harry to be dead."

"Then where is he?" asked Snape.

"Beyond our help, but alive, and still fighting," Albus said, with no lie in his voice. He did not know where the circle of light had sent Harry, but more than a hundred years of studying magic had taught him that spells

had a way of changing worlds and boundaries. Throwing Harry into that power might have been Voldemort's gravest mistake.

"How do you think he survived the curse again, Severus?" asked Dumbledore.

"Through his vast amounts of pure magic," Snape replied. "We have all seen the reports. Potter's pure magic is huge. It doesn't come as a surprise that it protected him against Avada Kedavra."

"Perhaps," Dumbledore said. "But I think Harry tapped into something a lot deeper than pure magic to save Ginny Weasley, and survive the unforgivable curse again."

"How..." Snape began but quickly changed his question. "What?"

"The power the Dark Lord knows not..." Dumbledore recited. "Voldemort already possessed pure magic, as do all witches and wizards. Harry possessed it in much larger quantities than the rest of us but it was not a power the Dark Lord knew not. The pure magic had been forced into Harry through circumstance and was continually forced to grow as he fought one life threatening battle after another this year."

"You believe Potter has another power?" Snape asked.

Dumbledore smiled truly for the first time that day. "Oh yes. He must. For Voldemort to be able to live after being assaulted by Harry's pure magic proves it. He may grow stronger once he recovers but Harry will forever hold the advantage over him once he learns how to tap into this deeper power."

Snape began to see sense in Dumbledore's words and formed a few theories of his own. "Love," he whispered, so quietly it was almost not heard. "Potter somehow manifested his love into a power." It sounded ridiculous to him but Dumbledore nodded and his eyes again twinkled.

"The power the Dark Lord knows not," he said carefully, those words now making more sense than they ever had before. "Harry has delved into a magic stronger and more terrible than any other force in this world."

“So he has more pure magic than all of the students at Hogwarts combined,” Snape said sarcastically. “And yet he still manages to create something new on his own....”

Dumbledore shook his head. “Not quite...” he added. “There is, in fact, one other known instance where this love magic has been documented.”

“Where?” asked Snape.

“Behind a door in the Department of Mysteries,” Dumbledore answered. “Put there by Godric Gryffindor himself almost exactly one thousand years ago and never opened since.”

Early the Next Morning

March 23

Nothing but pain and bitter anguish enveloped Ginny as she awoke. Though she kept her eyes closed, they could not stop the fresh flow of desperate tears. Everything that had happened over the past few days ran through her mind and she searched for some hope that would help her keep her sanity.

The worst thing had been telling Ron and Hermione. They had faltered, but were resolutely strong. She knew they had their hope to cling to, as did she, but how could Harry have survived against so strong of a magic? It didn't seem possible.

With a sigh, Ginny rolled over in bed and picked up Harry's silver ring from the bedside table. She had given it to him at Christmas only four months ago. Only four months she thought. The world had changed beyond repair in those short months, and Harry had been at the centre of it all.

Ginny idly placed the ring on her index finger but it was much too big. It hung loosely and would easily fall off if she dropped her hand. With a long, desperate sigh, she placed the ring back on the bedside table and rubbed her eyes of sleep. She didn't want to have to get up today. She felt physically and emotionally drained.

Down in the common room she could hear people moving around and talking, getting ready for another day at Hogwarts. She envied them in their ignorance... well most of them anyway. As it had a way of doing, the story of what had happened to Harry had spread through the school like wildfire, as had the rumour that he loved her. No, Ginny could not face the crowds today.

The morning slipped slowly by and at about ten thirty; Ginny sat up in bed and picked up her wand. After a few summoning charms she sat with a quill and ink, and something much more special to her. Resting on her knees was her journal.

Everlasting Thoughts

Harry had given it to her, and she had written in it dozens of times. All her fears, her desires, her regrets had been written in its cream-white pages over the past few months, and Ginny felt that the book had become a part of her. She opened it to a fresh page and inked her eagle feather quill.

With the quill poised over the page, Ginny sniffed, biting her bottom lip. Her eyes glazed over with unshed tears and heaving a sigh, wrote.

You're gone.

It's been two days. Two long days of nothing but suffocating silence and regret. The castle is so quiet and the atmosphere so tense.

I miss you.

I don't know if you're coming back or if you're even alive, but I have to believe that you are. You survived the curse again Harry. You have done what no one in the history of our world has ever managed to do and, while the curse didn't kill you, you still may be dead.

Please don't be dead, Harry. Please.

I grew up on stories of your bravery, of your courage and defeat of You-Know-Who, of Voldemort. It was your mother's love that saved you that awful night so many years ago, your mother's love that first allowed you to challenge the power of evil and live. It wasn't of your own making

that you had to face him, Fate decided that for you, but you faced it admirably and with more heart than anyone could ever hope to ask for.

I don't know why I'm writing this.

I love you, Harry. Isn't that enough? I fell in love with your legend, but over the years, you became more than The Boy Who Lived to me. You became just Harry. You were just Harry. Not the person the world sees, not the legend. But real and strong. I watched you struggle silently over the long years, one life altering trial to the next, and yet you still survived.

I saw the burden you carry grow until it seemed you were walking with a hunch. You were too young to carry that burden, to have the weight of the entire world placed unfairly upon your shoulders... but you faced it with the same will to survive and heroism as you showed in that clearing only two days ago. I realised that you were too young to carry it, but you were the only one with the strength and heart to do so.

I love you, Harry. But you're gone and I don't know if you're coming back.

Albus Dumbledore paced his study silently. Four days had passed and no sign of Harry had been discovered. Dumbledore was not surprised. He had expected as much. The magic that Harry stopped was stronger than the foundations of Hogwarts; it would never reveal all of its secrets. Harry was fighting on his own now.

Fawkes sang softly, heartening Dumbledore. He looked at the open and forgotten books and scrolls that lay on his desk. He searched for anything that would help them find Harry, but there was nothing. And there won't be he thought sadly. What have I done? he questioned himself darkly.

"What have I done?" he said to the room this time. "What have I done...."

"Still fighting the inevitable, Albus?" one of the portraits asked him.

Dumbledore sat down heavily in his large chair and looked up to Phineas Nigellus. "Indeed, Phineas," he said with cold eyes. "Our world needs to repair itself."

Phineas laughed harshly. "What happened four days ago is not going to be so easily repaired," he said. "If it ever will be."

Dumbledore fell silent, as did Phineas and Fawkes. "I failed Harry," he managed after a time.

"Failed?" questioned Phineas. "No I don't think so..."

Dumbledore shook his head. "My decisions have decimated the Wizarding world, and put Harry in the grave."

"Nothing could put that boy in the grave, Albus," Phineas replied with another harsh laugh. "He is far too strong for that."

Despite it all Dumbledore smiled. "He does possess rather high amounts of power...."

Phineas nodded in agreement. "Not just magically strong, Albus," he said. "That boy possesses morals that put the rest of us to shame. He is selfless, resilient, kind, decent, just. He is everything we should be, and more."

Dumbledore nodded and for the first time that day, the familiar twinkle flared into his eyes. "You're right, Phineas," he said. "Harry cannot be dead."

"No, Albus," Phineas agreed. "People such as him don't fall out of stories without living to see the end. Mr. Potter will return, rather spectacularly and just when he is needed I think."

"I fear he will be needed all too soon," Dumbledore replied gravely. "Voldemort's strength will return, maybe not for many months but he will be back... and without Harry..."

"Our world will fail," Phineas finished sadly and the two of them fell into a deep silence. After a long minute, it was broken. "Where do we go from here, Albus?"

Dumbledore sighed and removed his glasses from the pocket of his robes, placing them on his face. "From here, Phineas, from here we tell the world what happened."

Harry Potter's Final Repose?

Written by Ian Lyterman

It seems the world once again owes its peace to a boy only sixteen years of age. Forever the saviour and protector of the people, Harry Potter has once again shown his great worth and fought the Dark Lord in a duel that may have led to the young hero's death.

Following the devastating events of March 20th, the Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry has informed the Prophet of Mr. Potter's courageous and undeniable noble sacrifice.

Harry Potter. The world should be used to hearing that name by now. A boy who has now twice survived the Killing Curse, slain a basilisk, faced down Dementors and duelled the Dark Lord. Whenever and wherever extraordinary and dangerous events have taken place, one found our hero.

But weep, for Harry Potter may have paid the ultimate price for our protection. While hundreds of Aurors from a handful of the world's Ministries battled the Dark Lord's forces in the village of Hogsmeade, the real battle for our very world took place in a far more sinister and hopeless place.

Harry Potter and the Dark Lord duelled almost to the death in a hidden clearing within the Forbidden Forest as the Aurors and Death Eaters clashed. Unbeknownst to them, had Harry Potter lost that duel, they would all have perished and Hogwarts castle would have fallen.

He Who Must Not Be Named summoned an ancient power to devour Hogwarts and the surrounding area. Through his courage and audacity, Harry Potter once again survived the Dark Lord's Killing Curse and succeeded in ending the slaughter that day. You-Know-Who retreated after Potter almost destroyed him. The remaining Death Eaters fled as their master did. We are all familiar with the battle of that day, what we

did not know is why it ended.

Before I write any further I think it should be appreciated that our world possesses only a handful of extraordinary men and women. Truly extraordinary people that rise above the rest of us and do what is right for the world. We admire these people. We admire Harry Potter. These people are so selfless, sometimes deadly, that there are moments when our history, and our present, leaps forward into the future on the backs of these amazing people.

Harry Potter sacrificed himself. He stepped into a void of darkness, into the abyss created by the Dark Lord. He closed a magical portal that had the force to rip away the foundations of Hogwarts castle. With no thought to his own well being, he saved us all with one of the greatest acts of heroism our world has ever known.

A world-wide search began today for Harry Potter, who has neither been seen nor heard of since his disappearance. After beating back the most evil Dark Lord to have ever existed, and saving the lives of over a thousand, has Harry Potter finally succumbed? Was his sacrifice the ultimate one, or is he still fighting out there? Somewhere between worlds and time is our saviour still alive...?

The facts and magic say he isn't, but I believe that the amazing life and story of Harry Potter will not end this way. A boy who was ruled by prophecy, but rebelled against Fate, cannot be so easily defeated by sacrifice or death.

The entire student population and staff in the Great Hall read in awe filled silence, the Sunday evening edition of The Daily Prophet. Apart from whispered rumours and overheard conversations, this was the first information they had heard of Harry Potter since his disappearance over a week ago.

Dumbledore had specially arranged with the Prophet to deliver a copy to everyone in the Hall. The silence now had shown him that most of the students were now realising Harry's sacrifice. The article went on for many other pages, discussing in detail Harry's duel with Voldemort and his life up to that point. It was pages full of sorrow and Harry's will to

survive.

Ron and Hermione had known what had happened to Harry, but still they read the paper. Ron's eyes had glazed over with sadness and Hermione was openly crying. The Gryffindors read, and re-read the article before silently putting it aside to absorb its meaning.

The soft, candle lit glow cast a long magical shadow on the Hall. The sky reflected in the enchanted ceiling was alight with stars and a half-moon that swam lazily overhead. The Hall remained silent.

It was Dumbledore who spoke first. He stood from his chair at the Staff table and did not have to raise his hands for silence. Dumbledore surveyed the sea of faces before him. They reflected heartbreaking hope in their eyes. They expected him to make it right, to bring Harry back. It was impossible. He could never admit it to the school, but Harry was now beyond any help this world could give him. It was in Fate's hands now.

"Do not be discouraged," Dumbledore managed after a long, desperate moment. "Mr. Potter's life may not have been claimed yet. He has defeated Death before, and I have a feeling he will again.... He has just saved our world from destruction and has given us the time needed to mount our defences once again."

"I miss him so much," Hermione whispered shakily, her arms around Ron. "We have to find him..."

"It's okay... It'll be okay. Harry will be back," Ron whispered almost as a catechism of comfort, but not allowing himself to believe it. If Dumbledore couldn't find him, then they didn't have a chance.

"The war has abated for now," Dumbledore continued. "Hogsmeade will once again be rebuilt, and the world will recuperate after the loss of so many lives. The International Confederation will be sending aid and many of the surviving students from the Beauxbatons Academy will soon be continuing their education here at Hogwarts."

Mumbled whispers broke out at this. Ginny listened attentively to Dumbledore but her mind was on Harry and the last moments they had

spent together. A silent tear fell from her eye and onto her cheek as she held his ring tightly in her hand.

"I am afraid our struggle is far from over," Dumbledore managed sadly. "Lord Voldemort has been temporarily weakened, but he will return. His armies will grow and the fight will once again be ignited with renewed ferocity." As Dumbledore said this he thought of the prophecy, and of their need for Harry. "Harry Potter will be needed for this to end. I have no doubt that he will return. And when he does, not even the Dark Lord will be able to stop him. He has come too far to lose now."

The silence in the Hall returned and was only broken by stifled sobs throughout the room. Ginny looked around the Hall and at the many glances she herself was receiving. They all knew what had saved her life in the clearing. They knew Harry loved her and that they were more than friends. They also had a deep hope that Harry would return and fight for them. They knew they could not defeat the Dark Lord alone.

Sighing deeply, Ginny thought back to late last year, when she had spoken to Harry about the hope the world had in him.

Harry looked up and into her eyes. "Yeah...." he sighed. "I just hope I don't let them down, Ginny."

Ginny smiled brilliantly at him. A smile filled with trust, hope, belief, and something else Harry couldn't place that spread to her eyes. "You won't," she said simply, without a waver of doubt in her voice. "It's just not who you are."

"You really believe that?"

"Of course I do," she answered seriously. "I wouldn't say it if I didn't."

If Ginny had known then, how much it was going to cost all of them for those words to ring true, she would never have said them. Another tear fell from her eyes.

"Harry once spoke to me of happy endings," Dumbledore continued, every pair of eyes still on his. "He told me there was no such thing as a happy ending, but we still have to do our best and strive for one, even if it didn't exist." A tear now fell down Dumbledore's cheek. "Have hope,"

he managed with a sense of finality. "And raise your goblets, to Harry Potter."

With a flick of his wand Dernas sent a few potion vials flying neatly into his bag. Another flick and a few of his shirts joined them. Ten minutes later and the small room in the staff quarters that he had lived in the past few months was bare of all his belongings. He shouldered the magically enhanced backpack and turned towards the door.

"Leaving without saying goodbye, Dernas?" questioned a familiar voice.

Dernas jumped, startled. "Dumbledore!" he said shocked. "Not many people can sneak up on me like that."

Dumbledore offered him a sad smile. "I have always seemed to have a knack for showing up just where I am needed, Dernas," the wizened headmaster replied. "Tell me, are you leaving?"

Trask nodded. "I am," he said. "I've spoken to Kingsley Shacklebolt about becoming an Auror. He said we can work around the fact that I'm forty years older than the cut-off age."

Dumbledore smiled. "Admirable, Dernas. I suspected bringing you out of retirement might inspire you to take an active role in this war."

Trask nodded. "He saw me fight last week in Hogsmeade with... with Harry. This world is going to need all the Aurors it can get all too soon."

A brief shadow passed over Dumbledore's face. "Perhaps after training they'll place you in the Headquarters on the Hogsmeade road. I'm sure Harry would like to see you again when he returns."

Trask clicked his teeth. "How can you be so certain he's alive?" he asked honestly.

"I cannot," he managed in reply. "The blood magic could have thrown him to any point across time and space, even through the boundaries that separate universes. But wherever he is, you can be sure he's

fighting to get back. That is Harry.”

Trask sighed and then offered his hand to Dumbledore. “Goodbye, Albus,” he said. “Owl me if you hear anything.”

And with that, Dernas walked past the headmaster and down out of Hogwarts. With him went his trunk, which held on top of all the other paraphernalia, Harry’s sword.

The Sword of the Hero.

Dernas hoped one day to return it.

Ron, Hermione and Ginny sat quietly in Dumbledore’s study, sipping on cups of tea and sucking sherbet lemons.

“How are you?” Dumbledore asked kindly, his eyes twinkling.

Not one of them spoke for a moment as they all reflected. Ginny eventually did. “Managing,” she said quietly. “As well as can be.”

The three of them were shattered. Without Harry they felt scared and alone, even though they had each other. It was worse because they did not know if Harry was alive or dead. Waiting was the worst thing.

“I assume it has not been easy,” Dumbledore said. “For anyone. But I would not give up on Harry just yet.”

Hermione looked up at the headmaster with tear filled eyes. “How do we know if he’s alive?” she asked quietly.

“We cannot know, Miss. Granger,” Dumbledore replied. “But I do not believe Harry to be dead.”

“Have you any idea where he is?” asked Ron.

Dumbledore sighed and looked past them and into a foggy future, a thousand possibilities ran through his mind, each one less likely than the last. “I have no idea,” he said. “Magic is truly an amazing thing, but it is unpredictable. Harry will have to make some hard choices, wherever he is, to ensure his survival.”

The three of them could not say anything to that, so they didn't. "Was there anything else, Professor?" Hermione asked.

Dumbledore nodded. "A few weeks ago Harry came to me with an idea to make the DA into protectors of the school."

Ron looked up at the headmaster and wiped his eyes of tears. "He bought us dragon armour and was... he was lost before he could do anything more."

"I would hope you three, and perhaps Mr. Longbottom and Miss. Lovegood, would like to continue this project."

Ron, Hermione and Ginny nodded their agreement.

The International Confederation

"Hundreds have died on the streets of Hogsmeade. The Dark Lord Voldemort has not been defeated and the boy, Harry Potter, has disappeared off the face of this earth. Could someone please explain to me where we went wrong?"

Dumbledore sighed as the American Ambassador, Sorcerer John Rafter, voiced what the entire Confederation was thinking. The biggest magical battle ever fought in modern times could not avoid scrutiny. He rose from his chair, the magical amplifiers making sure his voice carried to all of the members in the massive auditorium.

The full meeting of the International Confederation involved over two thousand members in the long rows of seats and benches that rose around the room. Situated in the thousands of seats beyond the Confederation benches were over three thousand civilians and members of the world's press.

"I warned this Confederation more than a dozen times," Dumbledore said with an edge to his voice. "Demanding it recognise the threat that is Voldemort. Most of you chose not to listen and good men and women, good Aurors have died for your arrogance."

Tremendous cries of outrage sprung from over one thousand members and the cameras from the press lit the massive room with hundreds of flashes. After a moment they were silenced as Dumbledore raised his hands, much like the same way he did in the Great Hall.

“Voldemort cannot be defeated by anyone other than Harry Potter, who has indeed disappeared. But make no mistake, Mr. Rafter,” Dumbledore spoke to the American representative. “He is no boy. Harry Potter survived the Avada Kedavra curse once again and stopped the destruction of Hogwarts.”

Many gasps and shouts of denial were cried as Dumbledore stopped speaking, but he was not done yet. “You can’t even begin to imagine the amount of power needed to destroy Hogwarts, but this is the power Lord Voldemort now possesses. Harry Potter survived through pure courage and audacity, but paid for his heroism dearly in the end.”

“What happened to him, Dumbledore?” asked Sorcerer Rafter. “Where is Harry Potter?”

Dumbledore sighed and his eyes glazed over with unshed tears. “Beyond our help,” he answered with a shake to his voice. “And that is why we must act now, and create an army strong enough to withstand the coming darkness. Voldemort will return. He is weakened, but he will return. All we can do is defend our land, but we cannot do it alone.”

The thousands of people in the Hall were silent as they heard the truth in Dumbledore’s voice. He continued sadly. “Put aside all your differences, for if we do not unite now, it will not be just the Aurors who pay the price next time. It will be you and your families. Your children will fight this war, as will the next generation. Do not make them suffer as we have. Choose wisely today, the fate of this entire planet depends upon it.”

Three weeks after the battle for Hogsmeade and Hogwarts the world was still trying to regain its sense of normality. The Auror ranks were growing slowly, but steadily after the International Confederation had formed a coalition of all the Ministry power in the world. Tens of thousands of Aurors were on alert all around the world for dark activity.

Voldemort and his Death Eaters could not be found. Just like Harry, he had seemingly disappeared off the face of the earth, leaving nothing that could track him. Although the Dark Lord was still alive, peace had momentarily returned to the Wizarding world. It would not last though; it would never last as long as Voldemort lived.

The Prophet ran daily articles on the current situation in the world and of the successful reconstruction of Hogsmeade village. Many articles and columns were devoted solely to Harry, who was now mourned by most in the British Wizarding world. It had been widely agreed by the population that Harry had died, but that did not stop the Ministry, led by Arthur Weasley, from searching the globe for him.

His picture was released to the Muggle government and authorities. The British Prime Minister had been informed of the situation and had had all the Muggle Hospitals searched throughout the country for a boy matching his description, with several life threatening wounds and a large piece of his shoulder missing. The entire population of the United Kingdom, Wizard and Muggle, was on the lookout for a boy with a lightning bolt shaped scar on his forehead.

After one and a half months the search was called off. Harry had not been found. Many now believed him dead. Though he was not forgotten, he rose from a hero and became a martyr in the world's eyes.

Only a few people still believed him to be alive. The entire Weasley clan, Dumbledore, Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and a handful of Hogwarts students refused to accept that he was dead. They had accepted he was gone, for how long they did not know, but he was not dead.

Before he disappeared, Harry inspired hope in the wizards and witches of Britain. Many tried in vain to find an adequate description for his bravery and heroism. They searched for a description that would cover his extraordinary deeds. They wanted everyone to know and learn the story of Harry Potter so the world could stand in awe and respect him for his great deeds. His feats of courage were almost incomprehensible to ordinary people. They were to be known so proper thanks could be given, even if he was dead.

Many books were published in the following weeks after his

disappearance, detailing Harry's spectacular and heart wrenching life. The world learned of his struggles through Hogwarts and his sacrifice for the greater good. The Wizarding population found themselves filled with respect and admiration for a boy who had saved them against the strongest evil their world had to offer.

They found themselves imagining how they would have managed if placed in even one of Harry's life threatening situations. They admired Harry for risking his life countless times, even for complete strangers. His struggle caused many to question their own position in the world, and what they could do to make a difference. Candidates for Auror training tripled a week after his life story was released. These people wondered what their lives were for, and whether or not they would lay it down for a complete stranger.

Harry's story, Harry's life, was known to the world, and most could not even begin to imagine the terrible struggle their hero had been through. It restored people's faith in humanity, their hope, to know that someone was out there that had the will and strength to protect them.

It seemed that Harry had hundreds of chances to walk away, to take the easy way out, as most of them would have done. But he didn't. He chose to fight and kill a basilisk, he chose to face down Dementors, and he chose to defy Voldemort. He had many chances to give up, to turn away, to stop, but he didn't. It was a boost to the decency and humanity of the world that someone was willing to go through so much, for no personal gain, and save them all from destruction.

After reading the biography of Harry Potter, which had many passages of direct quotes and most of it written by statements from those close to Harry, one could not help but be changed forever. To have some brief understanding of the deep emotional stress, the physical and mental pain and injury that he had endured, all for a world that could never thank him properly now he was gone, was life altering.

But in the end there were no words left that could describe the absolute, unbreakable set of morals and selflessness that Harry had possessed. It was a spark that hardly anyone on the face of the earth could claim to have. There was heroism, courage and bravery everywhere, but what

Harry had was beyond that, and it could not be defined.

In the end, he was gone, but the world was now preparing for a fight without him. The fear of the Dark Lord was still upon them, and many would join his ranks over the coming months as he regained strength and power. With Harry Potter gone, those who had abandoned Voldemort would return once it became clear where the apparent power lay. It would soon become dark again, but the magical communities around the world were no longer idle. The following years would become the most decisive ever faced, but they would be faced by individuals with the same courage that their saviour had possessed.

They could do no less.

Darkness.

A pain in his shoulder that he could not see, or feel with his hands.

Darkness.

Floating in the abyss, the cold freezing the blood in his veins.

Darkness.

A warm wind blew into his face, though he had no idea why it should...

Darkness.

Memories swirled passed him and he felt terribly alone, naked against the vastness of magic and creation.

Darkness.

His memory faded and was replaced with consciousness, but suddenly Death grasped his heart in an icy grip... and squeezed.

Nothing but Darkness.

The End of Part One

[REVIEW?](#)

Well that was it. Very cruel and unusual of me to leave it there.... I know it wasn't what most of you were probably expecting in an ending, but then again, this is not the end. Click on that review link above and review at Schnoogle. You don't have to be registered, just click on the 'post reply' link and tell me what you thought of the story.

Look out for,

Harry Potter and the Defiance of the Hero

soon. More details about that on the reviewboard.

Also, if you join this Yahoo group then you can be notified by checking it to see if the sequel is up and going yet:

http://groups.yahoo.com/group/hero_trilogy/

Just starting to get this group off the ground after it fell into disuse. Join it and make yourself known.

Finally, thanks to all who have reviewed this little story along the way. Reviews are the only reason I continued and it definitely was some good feedback on how people would perceive me as a writer, and for that I thank you.

Check out Sword of the Hero on FanFiction.net. I'm updating it daily there with revised and edited chapters so it'll be a smoother read there.

Okay, that was it. Sword of the Hero has been a blast and I promise the sequel will be just as fun, if not better.

That's it, here's where I take a bow.... and I'm gone.

joe6991